A New Era in Their History:

Isaac McCoy's Indian Canaan and the Baptist Triennial Convention

BY DANIEL WILLIAMS

John Ross (1790–1866) served as principal chief of the Cherokee from 1828 until his death. Ross was a talented negotiator who promoted the cause of the Cherokee in Washington in the late 1810s and 1820s. Although opposed to Indian Removal, Ross was compelled to comply with the terms of the Treaty of New Enchota in 1835, which led to Cherokee removal later in the decade. *(Image: Library of Congress)*

With the return of peace signified by the treaties of Ghent and Portage des Sioux in 1815, the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States for Foreign Missions turned its attention to the so-called benighted Indians of America's western frontier.[1] This convention had been organized the year before in Philadelphia to support Christian missionaries throughout the world. Because it only met every three years (hence Triennial), it entrusted its day-to-day operations to the hands of a Board of Foreign Missions. Led by this Board, the Baptist denomination committed itself to reform—that is, to "civilize" and Christianize—American Indian tribes, which ultimately embroiled it in the national controversy over removal in the 1820s and 1830s. This controversy thrust the fledgling denomination onto the national stage even as it threatened the denomination's fragile unity. By sending out missionaries, the Baptists hoped to transform the Indians, but as the denomination debated public policy, the Indians transformed the Baptists. Baptists rejected the humanitarian vision of its chief missionary to the Indians, Isaac McCoy, thereby missing perhaps their greatest opportunity to be of help to the tribes.

It is appropriate that historians have studied missionary Isaac McCoy's side of this story, as he was the chief Baptist actor on the national stage during the Indian removal crisis, but the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions often became the antagonist—or at least the annoying background noise—in such a telling.[2] This article attempts to put the Board and Convention at the center of the narrative. To do so contributes to historians' understanding of how Christian denominations interacted with the issue of Indian removal at an institutional level. Historians have thoroughly studied the Indian removal crisis of Andrew Jackson's administration, including the opposition of numerous religious societies to his policies, but they have seldom focused on one denomination. Behind the official pronouncements, the issue of removal divided Baptists as deeply as it did the rest of the nation. Within the Baptist Triennial Convention, one can not only see two sides of the social reform movement in one denomination but also regional divisions that the debates over slavery and abolition would later exacerbate into a final schism.

Isaac McCoy later recounted that the idea for Indian colonization first came to him in June 1823 as he was returning from an early visit to the Ottawa tribe. He saw that the presence of white men had a devastating influence on the tribes and concluded that they would never survive in their traditional homelands. Settlers disregarded treaties and moved into tribal areas. Traders sold alcohol to natives regardless of the law. The fur trade had dried up. Traditional hunting grounds had diminished. Stories of starving and impoverished natives filled McCoy's printed letters and journals.[3] McCoy's plan was not simply one of removal—that is, only to get the Indians out of the way of white settlers. He wanted to *colonize* them in territory west of the Mississippi. His plan called for giving each native who came to the territory a tract of land where he and his family could settle down and learn agriculture—a key component of becoming "civilized" in the eyes of white Americans. Naturally, there would also be missionaries in the territory to teach the Indians about Christianity. The plan eventually called for the establishment of a centralized government in the territory with a constitution, written legal system, and a representative legislature on par with the other states in the union.[4]

As a Baptist missionary among native tribes, Isaac McCoy (1784–1846) was an early proponent of removing tribes west of white settlement. McCoy and others argued that Native Americans needed to be protected from the corrupting influences of whiskey and unscrupulous whites so they might become "civilized." This idea gained the power of law in 1830 when Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act. *(Image: Morse Museum of Art)*

McCoy wrote letters seeking support for the plan. In fact, the first mention of McCoy's plan for Indian colonization in the Board of Foreign Missions' records is a passing reference to "an Asylum for educated Indians" in August 1823, only two months after McCoy says he first had the idea.[5] The Board mulled over the issue until its annual meeting in late April and early May 1824, when it voiced its consent to McCoy's plan. In its defense of colonization, the Board essentially echoed McCoy:

> That it is the opinion of brother M'Coy, and of the Board, it is expedient to make application

The journey of tribes forced by Indian Removal between 1838 and 1839 was referred to as the Trail of Tears. The tribes' journey passed through southern Missouri; more than 10,000 died along the way. *(Image: Cherokee Nation)*

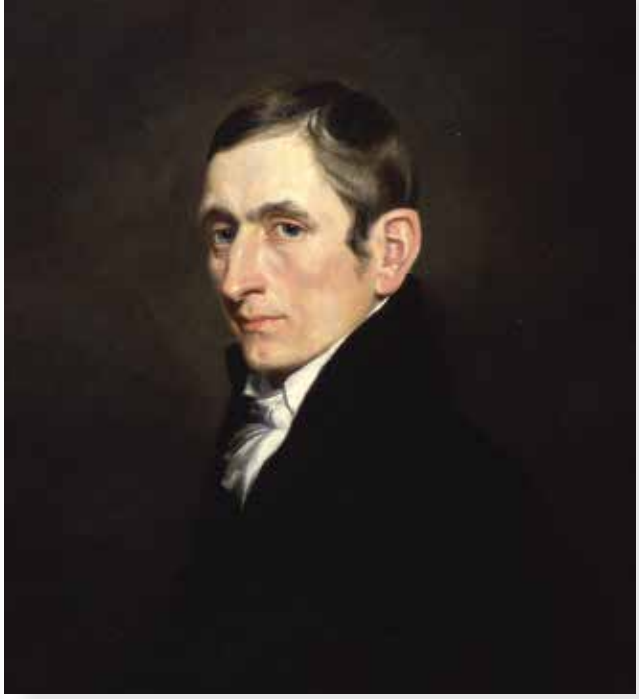
> to Congress, to obtain some section of the West, where civilized and converted Indians may find a home, alike remote from the neglect and prejudices of white persons, and from the necessity of obtaining a precarious subsistence from hunting; where agriculture and the arts may be cultivated, and the great truths of the gospel made known.[6]

For McCoy and those on the Board who sided with him, removing the Indians out of the way of white settlers and colonizing them in the West would be for the Indians' own good. In their minds, this would be a continuation—one might say even the fulfillment—of their efforts to Christianize and civilize the tribes, lest they perish. Baptists had availed themselves of federal funds for schools, blacksmiths, and agriculture under the Indian Civilization Fund. Colonization would be an even better means to the same end of reform, as the natives would then be free from white interference in their own land.

In October 1824, the Board appointed three of its members to a committee to research the subject and prepare a memorial that it could present to Congress "as early as practicable."[7] It was November 1827, however, before it finally authorized the corresponding secretary to go to Washington with such a memorial to the president. The secretary was also to help McCoy procure a government agency to visit the site of the proposed Indian colony, and it gave McCoy, who was present at that meeting, the authorization to publish his manuscript, "Remarks on the Practicability of Indian Reform."[8] After four years of on-and-off discussion on the subject, the Board read a letter from McCoy on January 2, 1828, that said he had presented its memorial to Congress and it had been referred to the Committee on Indian Affairs.[9]

In all likelihood, internal problems within the Convention and the Board were a significant factor in this delay between the initial decision to lobby for removal and the final presentation of the memorial to Congress. A former missionary associate accused McCoy

This cartoon from 1833 places President Andrew Jackson at the head of a caravan of "the Rights of Man," but it is clearly the work of demonic forces as it takes Native Americans in a caged wagon away. *(Image: Library of Congress)*



Jeremiah Evarts (1781–1831) was a Christian missionary and writer. He wrote more than two dozen articles under the pen name "William Penn" opposing the idea of Indian Removal. Evarts hoped to organize a group of members of Congress to block the Indian Removal Act of 1830, but he was unsuccessful. *(Image: Morse Museum of American Art)*

of misconduct at the 1823 Convention, a charge that the Board investigated in early 1824 and of which he was officially exonerated at the 1826 Convention.[10] During the mid-1820s, the Board struggled with a precarious financial situation at McCoy's Carey Station, which relied largely on government funds instead of mission funds. The station was finally criticized by the 1826 Convention (and even more so by McCoy) for its poor management.[11] In January 1826, McCoy traveled east to enroll seven of his former Indian students into Columbian College. The Board denied them entry "for a variety of reasons," which were never printed in the records. It took nearly two months to work out the embarrassing situation, which was probably exacerbated by a lack of communication on McCoy's part. Finally, the Indians were accepted to Hamilton Institute in New York on the promise that they would be funded by the government.[12] All of these incidents may well have contributed to the delay in presenting the memorial.

It also seems likely that differences of opinion between Board members on the subject of removal may have held up the memorial. Such differences certainly caused problems for McCoy's plan later, so it is not unreasonable to assume they did so in the early stages as well. McCoy recollected in his *History of Baptist Indian Missions* that it was Rev. Spencer H. Cone of New York City who was "warmly in favour" of colonization in late 1827 and promoted the plan to the Board. At that time, McCoy said, some Board members questioned whether colonization would work.[13]

The national political situation deserves some comment here as well. In May 1824, the *American Baptist Magazine and Missionary Intelligencer* reprinted a letter from President James Monroe to Congress on Georgia's claims to Cherokee lands. Monroe was not willing to force removal at that time, deeming it inhumane to the Indians and unnecessary under the federal government's compact with Georgia, but he did express the hope that the Indians could be convinced to remove to a new homeland for their own good in many of the same terms that McCoy used. As this was published under the Board's auspices around the same time as its members were initially considering McCoy's colonization proposals, they may have been hoping to defend whatever decisions they made about colonization to their Baptist brethren on the grounds that the federal government was thinking in similar terms. They could also shape federal policy and benefit from the funds it dedicated to that end.[14] In late 1824 and early 1825, Monroe made Indian removal a definite federal policy, but he did not advocate coerced removal. John Quincy Adams continued in the same vein, although not enthusiastically.[15] By presenting a memorial in 1828, the Board, under McCoy's influence, was hoping to push the Adams administration further on the issue. They also certainly knew that the Indians would be a question in the upcoming election. Indeed, Andrew Jackson *would* push the matter further when he became president in 1829, and the Baptists, represented largely by McCoy, would be on the forefront of that push.

The 1829 Convention authorized another memorial in favor of colonization.[16] On November 16, the Board considered a proposal from McCoy as well as one from its own committee and gave that committee the authority to prepare yet another one—a rather lengthy process that perhaps suggests some significant differences of opinion.[17] The treasurer of the Board, Heman Lincoln, met McCoy in Washington in December 1829 to present to Congress

Under the terms of the Indian Removal Act, the five "civilized tribes"—the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Seminole, and Creek—were forcibly removed from Georgia, Alabama, Florida, and Mississippi to western lands in "Indian territory" in present-day Oklahoma. *(Image: W.W. Norton and Company)*

the memorial the Board had finally approved. McCoy, however, found this one too cautious, as it "did not present a prayer in favour of settling the Indians in the West, but merely asked the Government, in event of Indian removal, to provide for them in the future."[18] Given this statement and the evangelical push against removal that was largely centered in Boston where the Board met, it would not be surprising that some members of the Board had expressed reservations about removal and had insisted upon such a watered-down resolution. McCoy nearly presented his own memorial instead of the Board's, but a strongly worded warning from the Board threatened his dismissal if he did, preventing him from doing so.[19]

As extra insurance against the large numbers of antiremoval memorials flooding Congress, McCoy consulted with his Baptist brethren in Philadelphia, who authored another resolution in favor of colonization, and he notes in his *History* that he also received favorable resolutions from other places.[20] Although the Board's records give precious few details, they indicate "a diversity of sentiment" among members on how best to proceed with Indian missions in light of removal—and probably even on whether it should take place at all.[21] The official Baptist records give the dissenters to McCoy's proposals a presence but not a voice; that is, one knows they are there, but not what they said. While such a silence of specifics is not unusual in Baptist records, one cannot help but wonder whether or not in this instance it is, in fact, a loud silence. Some may have opposed removal, arguing as Jeremiah Evarts of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions did, that if missionaries and the government could civilize the tribes, whites would accept them and they would not have to leave their homelands.[22] Some may have doubted whether the Indians could survive at all and may not have cared either way.

The 1832 Convention may have been the moment when the storm that had broken out in the nation over removal struck the denomination with the most fury. That year's report of the Committee on Indian Missions was the subject for Monday morning, April 30, and it was discussed until the hour of adjournment. The discussion continued that afternoon until "[t]he embarrassments of the subject seeming to multiply, an interval of devotion was agreed upon," where they prayed for wisdom. The report was then returned to an enlarged committee. The next morning, it was finally read and adopted.[23] McCoy included a copy of the unedited report in the appendix of *History of Baptist Indian Missions*. A comparison of this initial report with the final version printed in the Convention report reveals a telling removal of some key details of McCoy's plan. The Convention erased a description of the territory to which the Indians were moving as well as a statement about the land, "where their title to the soil is to be secured by the same tenure that gives security to the possessions of white citizens of the United States, and where no collision will exist between State and national claims." Also stricken from record was "the fond expectation . . . of their being consolidated into one friendly community, and ultimately becoming a representative part of our great Republic."[24] The final report retained the same sense of urgency—that the removal crisis was the greatest and perhaps the final

opportunity to help the Indians—but it spoke largely in spiritual terms. It was, after all, the election year of 1832, and Jackson's Indian policies were a crucial, divisive issue in the election. The Board and Convention, which had in the past made numerous political statements in favor of Indian removal, were now trying to back away and disavow political statements—or at least that is how McCoy presented the issue.

In fact, the Convention's refusal to present the prospect of the Indians obtaining land rights and becoming a part of the republic was a political statement. The Board had already put its weight (although perhaps not its entire weight) behind the political issue of removal as advocated by McCoy. The Convention likewise bowed to the political reality of removal, despite the protests and influence of at least some of its delegates.[25] It did not, however, put its weight behind the political steps necessary in McCoy's estimation to ensure that the Indians could survive and thrive once they were removed. The veteran missionary later lamented that Baptists even missed opportunities to expand their spiritual missions after removal because the Board had only half-heartedly supported colonization and never pushed it within the denomination in the first place.[26] It is difficult to say with clarity whether or not the denomination chose the path of least resistance, but by rejecting a key element of McCoy's vision, Baptists did indeed miss an opportunity.

The Monroe, Adams, and Jackson administrations and the events of those years cast serious doubt on the idea of a separate Indian polity. McCoy's colonization plan would have brought it to fruition. Jackson, in particular, could hardly be taken seriously when he spoke of Indian land rights. McCoy *was* serious, writing about them at length and advocating for them. There is much that could be legitimately criticized in his colonization plan, but it was far more humane and befitting of this nation's high ideals than what eventually came to be in the long run. The 1832 Convention thus seems to have been a moment of truth for Baptists, the moment when they could have chosen to implement this plan. One can only wonder how the course of Native American history may have been different had Baptists pushed religiously for Indian land rights and statehood west of the Mississippi.

ENDNOTES

1 Earl Eugene Eminhizer, *The Rise and Fall of the Triennial Convention* (Master's thesis, Crozier Theological Seminary, 1956), 58.

2 See George A. Schultz, *An Indian Canaan: Isaac McCoy and the Vision of an Indian State* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), and George Melvin Ella, *Isaac McCoy: Apostle of the Western Trail* (Springfield, Missouri: Particular Baptist Press, 2002).

3 Isaac McCoy, *History of Baptist Indian Missions* (Washington, D.C.: William M. Morrison, 1840), 196–97; Schultz, *Indian Canaan*, 22.

4 Schultz, *Indian Canaan*, 67–70, 181.

5 Baptist Board of Foreign Missions Records, pp. 130[?], 135, typewritten MS, American Baptist Historical Society (Atlanta).

6 Baptist Board of Foreign Missions, *Report* (1824), 423. The Annual Report was published in the September 1824 issue of the *American Baptist Magazine and Missionary Intelligencer* 4, no. 11.

7 Board of Foreign Missions Records, 184.

8 Ibid., 272.

9 Ibid., 277.

10 Ibid., 113, 125, 140–45, 153; General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States for Foreign Missions, *Report* (1826), 17. McCoy discusses these charges in his *History of Baptist Indian Missions*, 165-69.

11 Board of Foreign Missions Records (1826), 24–27.

12 Board of Foreign Missions Records, (1826), 222–26; Schultz, *Indian Canaan*, 81–82.

13 McCoy, *Baptist Indian Missions*, 322–23.

14 James Monroe, "Indian Reservations in Georgia," *American Baptist Magazine and Missionary Intelligencer* (May 1824), 341–43.

15 Schultz, *Indian Canaan*, 78, 85.

16 Triennial Convention, *Report* (1829), 32.

17 Board of Foreign Missions Records, (1829), 318–19.

18 McCoy, *Baptist Indian Missions*, 395–96.

19 Board of Foreign Missions Records, (1829), 322.

20 McCoy, *Baptist Indian Missions*, 397.

21 Board of Foreign Missions Records, 330.

22 John A. Andrews, *Revivals to Removal; Jeremiah Evarts, The Cherokee Nation, and The Search for Soul in America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 120.

23 Triennial Convention, *Report* (1832), 12–13.

24 McCoy, *Baptist Indian Missions*, 596-97.

25 McCoy did not mention the names of those who opposed the committee's report in *History*, but he was explicit that opposition came mainly from Massachusetts and Rhode Island. In his journal, he named Francis Wayland, a minister in Boston, as the instigator of the opposition (Schultz, *Indian Canaan*, 137).

26 McCoy, *Baptist Indian Missions*, 422-23.