

Nancy Ward (Nanye'hi)



The grave of Nancy Ward located near Benton, TN. Ward's grave was unmarked until 1923 when the Chattanooga chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution erected a stone pyramid and installed a fence to protect the gravesite. Recent efforts have yielded the site as being signified as a Tennessee State historical site.

With the exception of the Cherokees, Native American women generally were excluded from governmental affairs. Some Cherokee women were elevated to the status of Agehyagusta (“Beloved Woman”). These women had the privilege of participating alongside men in tribal councils, thus making important decisions on whether the tribe maintained peace or went to war against its neighbors. They even had the power to decide whether a prisoner of war lived or died. The most famous “beloved woman” among the Overhill Cherokees was Nancy Ward (Nanye’hi: “One who goes about”).

Born in the Cherokee town of Chota (near present-day Vonore, TN) in approximately 1738, Nanye’hi was a member of the Wolf clan. She accompanied her husband, Kingfisher, into the Battle of Taliwa in 1755 against her tribe’s foe, the Creeks. When her husband died in battle, the seventeen-year-old Nanye’hi picked up his weapon and helped the Cherokee drive the attacking Creeks off. She then assumed her husband’s place in the tribe and became one of the “War Women of the Cherokee” and eventually “Supreme Beloved Woman,” or *Ghigau*. As a War Woman, Nanye’hi not only participated in combat but also assumed a prominent role as tribal counselor and arbiter as conducted diplomacy and occasionally released war captives. In war, Nanye’hi could spare a captive from certain torture and death by waving the wing of a swan. She became an advocate of the “White Path,” the road of peace.

In the late 1750s, Nanye’hi married Bryant Ward, a white trader from South Carolina, and assumed the name Nancy Ward. She would retain her husband’s name even after he left her and their daughter Elizabeth (Betsy) to move back to South Carolina and be with his white wife and family.

During the Cherokee War of 1776, Ward saved the life of William Bean’s (one of Tennessee’s earliest settlers) wife, who had been taken captive during the hostilities. Familiar with Anglo-American ways, Ward adopted the customs of whites as she quickly learned how to make butter and cheese, which subsequently led her to assist the Cherokees as they began dairy operations. In her later years, Ward operated an inn along a road in Polk County that ran from Georgia to Nashville.

Until her death in 1822, Ward was an advocate of peace between Native Americans and whites. When the American Revolution broke out, the Cherokees were divided. Ward and other prominent leaders urged the Cherokees to avoid war and negotiate with the winning side to achieve their goals. They argued that the Cherokees could ill afford another devastating war in which they had suffered when allying with the French against the British during the French-Indian War (Seven Years' War). But militant Cherokees supported allying with the British and other tribes to wage war against the colonists as the best means to preserve their land and independence. They pointed to a series of recent negotiations by Ward's uncle and others that had recently resulted in the loss of Cherokee land. Unable to reconcile their differences, the two factions within the Cherokee tribe parted ways.

As the Revolution neared its conclusion, Ward and other peaceful Cherokees sought to persuade the colonists not to take additional Cherokee lands if they proved successful in their war against the British. Ward made a plea to the whites: "We are your mothers; you are our sons. Our cry is all for peace. . . . This peace must last forever. Let your women's sons be ours; our sons be yours." However, U.S. treaty commissioners pressured the Cherokees to cede additional land in 1783 and 1785 to the U.S. government. As many Cherokees continued to resist the Americans by resorting to violent attacks, Ward urged them to make peace. She advocated peace not because she embraced the American republic and its values, but because she recognized that further resistance to its military power was futile. The militant Cherokees eventually submitted to U.S. rule after being crushed, along with their Shawnee allies, at the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794.

Although whites initiated a "civilization" program for Native Americans, Ward rejected this plan because it included male property ownership and political leadership but denied Indian women these basic rights. Cherokee women, like their white counterparts, were expected to take up strictly domestic tasks. When Ward and several other War Women protested an 1817 treaty that would grant Indian land in Georgia to the United States, they were ignored. Ironically, they were ignored not by the U.S. government but by their own male Cherokee leaders. As a result of this civilization program, women would no longer wield power in Cherokee society.

Source: John R. Finger, *Tennessee Frontiers: Three Regions in Transition* (2001)