



VIRTUAL VISION QUEST

led by Wanda Patterson, Chair

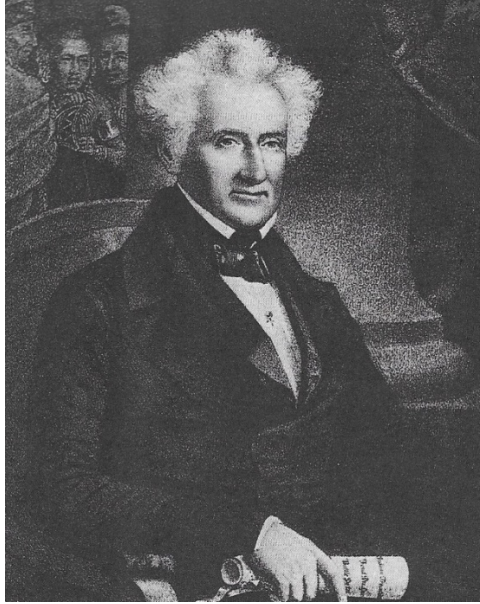
American Indians Committee

Fielding Lewis NSDAR

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Native Americans captured on canvas

While enjoying the Vann House Christmas Candlelight Tour last month, I entertained myself by trying to identify the famous Indians portrayed in lithographs on the walls of the mansion. Among the many recognizable faces were Cherokee leaders from the early nineteenth century, such as Joseph Vann, David Vann, Major Ridge, John Ross, and Sequoyah. Since those men lived prior to the invention of the camera, how was it possible that these faces appear in our museums and history books? We can thank a visionary named Thomas McKinney for the preservation of these likenesses.



Colonel Thomas McKenney

Thomas McKenney, reaching the rank of Colonel in the War of 1812, served as Superintendent of Indian Affairs under Presidents Madison, Monroe, Adams, and Jackson from 1816 until 1830. In the early years of the Republic, anything having to do with American Indians was the dominion of the War Department of which McKenney was a part. Colonel McKenney said that in his position as superintendent he controlled the destinies of more Indian nations on the American continent than any other man. His position was not one of title only. He handled a staggering amount of paperwork, keeping a hawk eye out for corruption among Indian agents. He dealt with foreign traders who fleeced Indians at every opportunity. He worked to tamp down whiskey smuggling to the Indians. He attempted to control the growing hordes of white invaders into Indian lands. And he supervised U.S. trade with Indians, particularly with the American Fur Company. Colonel McKenney was truly a friend to the American Indian and sought to protect the interests of Native people at every turn.

One of Colonel McKenney's most time-consuming jobs was orchestrating the visits of Indian delegations to Washington, D.C., to meet with the Great White Father and other government leaders. The purpose of the government's bringing these delegations to the nation's capital was abundantly clear to white officials: they wanted to impress primitive leaders from the Great Plains or the forests with the white man's awesome power and thus avoid costly frontier wars. McKenney favored these visits by delegations because he was a champion of Indian rights, and he'd rather impress the Natives with the

government's power and scare them into submission than to see bloodshed and loss of Indian lives.

If the visits were to conduct official business with the government, then the government paid the expense of the delegations. That meant paying for travel, food and drink, hotel stays in Washington, and gifts for the chiefs. Of course, Indian agents were also included in the largess of the government when such visits were considered to be in the government's interest. Unfortunately, these delegations quite often proved to be extraordinarily expensive. Sometime as many as 50 chiefs and warriors horned their way into the official delegations. The Indians were, obviously, primitive; and they were likely to consume enormous quantities of spirits at the hotel bar. They were responsible for tremendous damage to hotel rooms when they were drunk. And they expected royal entertainment and lavish gifts while they were in town. Unknown to the members of the delegations, the money for their visits was sometimes taken from the annuities which were promised to various tribes when they signed treaties with the government for land sales and exchanges.

The most prized gifts to the chiefs of delegations were peace medals. The "necklaces" with attached pendants containing the engraved portrait of the current Great White Father were so prized that they were handed down through the generations of chiefs' families. The medals were undeniable proof that the Native dignitary had been received by the Great White Father. Other prized presents were rifles and whiskey. Colonel McKenney had standing orders with the Deringer weapons maker for as many as fifty rifles at a time. Rifles played a great part in negotiating treaties on the frontier, as well. At one point a bidding war broke out between the Henry rifle company and Deringer for the government's orders for weapons to give the visiting delegations and treaty negotiators.

Chiefs were known to make unusual demands for specific gifts during their visits to Washington. It seems that a popular fashion accessory among "dandies" in the nation's capital was bright yellow shoes! A Winnebago chief demanded that each member of his delegation be gifted with a pair of the garish footwear. Among the papers of the Secretary of War is a document approving the purchase of yellow buckskin shoes with thin soles for each member of the Winnebago traveling group.

An example of the expense of hosting an Indian delegation is Chief Pushmataha, who brought eight chiefs and warriors to represent the Choctaw Nation in 1825.



Choctaw Chief Pushmataha

After the group settled into the Tenneson Hotel, they began to order oysters on the half shell and brandy by the bottle from room service. After two days of this exotic diet, they switched to gin slings and bottles of wine. Because it was Christmas Eve, they ordered punchbowls of eggnog which they had learned was the white man's holiday drink of choice. They celebrated New Year's Eve, drinking with their new white friends at the hotel bar, then switching back to oysters and brandy for the remainder of their stay. They rang up over seven thousand dollars in expenses, including travel costs. Among the charges were \$2,149.50 for liquor; \$75 for bootblacks; \$1,34.50 for clothing; \$400 for laundry; and \$58 for the barbershop. The grand total for their trip was \$7,463.56 at 1825 Washington prices! Unknown to the chiefs was that the U.S. government took half of that amount from the Choctaw Nation's annual annuity. So much for dollar diplomacy!

Congressional committees frequently questioned Colonel McKenney's expenditures for the Indian delegations, but Indian agents were able to substantiate the exact number of chiefs, wives, and warriors who were transported across the country for their official visits. McKenney frequently negotiated prices for transportation, hotel bills, gifts, and other expenses to mollify curious, cost-conscious Congressmen; but he considered the expenses to be the cost of doing business with Native chiefs.

Colonel McKinney was enamored with the exotic appearances of his guests and their regalia, so he decided that such "looks" should be preserved for posterity. Charles Bird King was a well-known portrait artist in Washington, having painted portraits of some of the leading men in government; therefore, McKinney engaged King to capture the delegates on canvas on behalf of the War Department. (Photography had not yet been invented.) McKinney escorted visiting Native dignitaries to King's studio to "sit" for the paintings for which King was paid twenty dollars each. Chiefs were often given copies of their portraits to take home. The portraits were truly works of art, depicting their subjects with great realism and artistry. The paintings were displayed in the halls of the War Department in what became known as the Indian Gallery. King's portraits were not only magnificent, but were the only record of the likenesses of many of the most prominent Indian leaders of the nineteenth century.

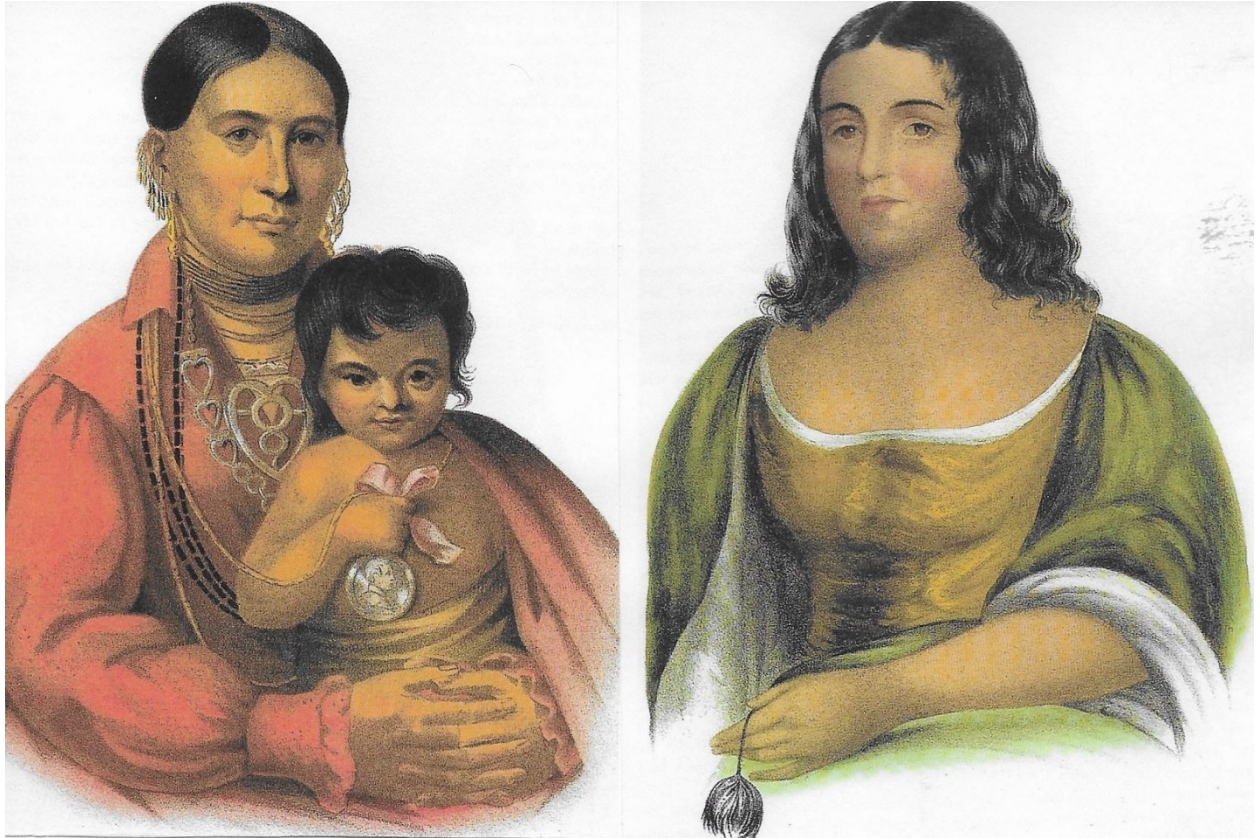
McKinney and President Jackson fell out over Indian removal, and McKinney was dismissed by Jackson in 1830. Members of Congress were critical of the cost of the portraits; and the artworks were eventually delivered to the Smithsonian, where many of the originals were destroyed by fire in 1865. Fortunately, McKinney had surreptitiously taken the portraits out of the gallery to be copied for a project he had been formulating, so that the visual record of early Indian leaders would be preserved.

Almost from the beginning of Colonel McKinney's tenure in the War Department, he had collected artifacts representing the tribes with which he conducted business. So fascinated was he with the Natives that he endlessly researched his subjects concerning their histories and practices, writing to Indian agents and missionaries, asking them to send him journals, books, and manuscripts, as well as lists of vocabulary in various languages. He also requested samples of plants used by medicine men in their cures. Glass cases lined the walls of the superintendent's office, displaying his vast collection of Indian weapons, pipes, clothing, baskets – anything which illustrated Indian culture.



Iowa Chiefs Mahaskah (left) and Shauhaunapotinia (right) posed for their official portraits bare-chested, displaying fantastical body painting and tatoos.

When Colonel McKinney was dismissed from office by Jackson, he took steps toward realizing his years-long dream of publishing a portfolio of lithographs of the portraits included in the Indian Gallery. He secretly removed the portraits a few at a time and delivered them to an engraver who copied them in the form of lithographs for the proposed book. Through a number of years of missteps and financial reversals, McKinney finally joined forces with James Hall of Cincinnati, who employed his and McKinney's vast knowledge of Native Americans to create the extensive text which accompanied the lithographs. The monumental work was divided into three volumes entitled McKinney and Hall's INDIAN TRIBES OF NORTH AMERICA. The two visionaries saw their work as "preserving an accurate visual record of a rapidly disappearing culture." On the rare occasion when an original of the three-volume set comes up for auction today, bidders may expect to pay thousands of dollars for this invaluable piece of history.



Mohongo, an Osage beauty (left), was the wife of Osage Chief Kihegashugah. Pocahontas (right) was the daughter of Chief Powhatan of the Virginia tribes. The two ladies were among the Native women included in the Indian Gallery of portraits. (The Pocahontas picture bears no similarity to the familiar likeness of her wearing a hat, a portrait which was painted while she lived in England with her white husband, John Rolfe.)



Sauk and Fox Chief Keokuk (left) and Seminole Chief Billy Bowlegs (right) wore colorful tribal regalia in their War Department portraits. Note that both chiefs wore peace medals given to them during their trips to Washington.