



CHEROKEE  
HERITAGE  
CENTER  
Tahlequah, OK

# COLUMNS

## First Impressions: Cherokee Printing Type in the 1800s

by Brian L. Slawson

It is often said that writing and printing is a kind of memory — thoughts can be remembered with marks on paper. Sequoyah, during an 1826 interview in Washington, DC, said that he had observed the use of books by others and that things once written were not forgotten. To put sounds onto paper would be like “catching a wild animal & taming it.” Since that time the syllabary has become an important part of Cherokee cultural identity.

And, in the 1820s, in order to produce printed documents — newspapers, reading books, religious texts and so on — it was necessary to first create metal printing type from the forms used in handwriting. My academic research involves how this Cherokee printing type was made — how it was technically crafted, how the letter forms originated, and importantly, what social interactions made it possible. The design, manufacture and use of Cherokee printing type, I think, is an important achievement deserving to be better understood as part of printing history in the Americas.

### MANUFACTURING METAL PRINTING TYPE

Today we are quite familiar with the full menu of fonts on our computers. These computer fonts, of course, have been constructed digitally but they often have older histories. For example, the ubiquitous typeface Times Roman was first designed in the 1930s for use in the London newspaper, The Times.

It can be difficult to contemplate the intricate and arcane process used to make metal printing type first introduced by Johann Gutenberg in 1450. There are three basic steps in the type-founding process: (1) Cutting the steel letter punch, (2) Forming the brass matrices, and (3) Casting the sticks of type from molten lead.

First, each letter shape is precisely cut with hand tools onto the end of a small steel blank to make a punch. Remember that each letter of the alphabet (85 symbols in the Cherokee syllabary, for ex-

ample) must be crafted by hand at a very small size. The engraving tools used are similar to those a jeweler would employ.

Once satisfied that the steel punch has a perfect shape, this is hammered into a brass block called a “matrix”. The set of matrices serve as the master molds from which large quantities of individual metal letters are then cast in a special alloy of lead, tin and antimony.

This set of lead printing type is then shipped out to printers to be used on a hand-pulled letterpress. Imagine the meticulous concentration needed to hand-set an entire newspaper page, one letter at a time. Of course, these days we do it all with computers.

### SOCIAL IMPACTS AND COLLABORATIONS

The development of the original Cherokee printing type and the first printed materials occurred during a period of intense social and political change in the Cherokee Nation. Missionaries were increasing their influence, calls from the State of Georgia for removal were beginning, and the first cracks of the Ross/Ridge factions appeared. During those uncertain times, the syllabary and the power to amplify your voice through printing, I would argue, becomes a symbol of cultural sovereignty and political independence.

One scholar, John Pickering, proposed what he call a universal alphabet for all American Indian languages. It had certain practical advantages, but a missionary with the American Board (ABCFM) Samuel Worcester argued against the idea. In a March 27, 1826, letter he wrote: “At their national council they have listened to a proposal to substitute an alphabet like that of Mr.

Pickering, and have rejected it. They have talked much of printing the new and famous character.” He continues: “Tell them now of printing in another character, and you

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Brian Slawson photographs Cherokee font in our museum collections.

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### *Cherokee Font, continued from Page One*

throw water upon the fire which you are wishing to kindle.”

Nevertheless, It is important to note that the production of Cherokee Type was not a singular effort — but a collaboration. Buck Watie (Elias Boudinot), who would later be the editor of the Cherokee Phoenix, promoted the Cherokee cause in a series of lectures and helped raise donations. The Cherokee leadership also funded and reviewed the project as missionaries facilitated the communication from New Echota to the expert type-founders in Boston.

#### **SOME DETAILS ABOUT CHEROKEE TYPE**

One interesting finding is that Principal Chief Charles R. Hicks first approached the Moravian missionaries, with whom he had a close personal affiliation, to help produce printing type. Unfortunately, the elderly Hicks died before the project progressed very far.

It was Samuel Worcester, along with the newly appointed Principal Chief John Ross, who took on responsibility for continuing the project. Worcester is sometimes accused of modifying the visual form of the original Sequoyan characters. While he did re-order the alphabetic sequence into a more “systematic” arrangement of syllables, he took great care in consulting with Cherokee leaders regarding the accuracy of the visual form.

Apparently, the first cutting of some of the letters was not entirely accurate. On June 12, 1827, Worcester wrote to Jeremiah Evarts, the official who was overseeing the work in Boston, that the errors “will not at all suit Maj. Lowry, and the letter I conclude, is of the small pica size, which will not suit Mr. Ross, two men whom I considered it of great importance, and took the greatest pains to please.” He adds that the revisions are “...not suited to my taste, but Maj. Lowry was very particular respecting that one letter, and I made it perhaps a hundred times before I could suit him.”

In that era, only a handful of skilled punch-cutters were working in the United States. We do know that the Cherokee printing type was cast in Boston at the New England Type Foundry, also called Baker & Greele. But the identity of the craftsman directly responsible for translating the syllabary into metal remains elusive. Converting a visual design into a perfect metal copy is no small task and it demands a skilled artisan to accomplish both an accurate and beautiful result. Who cut the Cherokee type? This was the original question that started my investigations. And although I can make some well-educated guesses, that question remains unanswered.

#### **BEYOND NEW ECHOTA**

Following the disruption of Removal, printing activities moved across the Mississippi as well. Samuel Worcester, who eventually settled at Park Hill, set up a new press for printing educational and religious materials. And, in 1844, the Cherokee Nation revived its newspaper, *The Cherokee Advocate*, at Tahlequah. Other examples might be the *Cherokee Messenger*, printed by Baptist missionary Evan Jones around 1844 or the printing activities at Dwight Mission by Frederick Schaub later in the 1800s.

Finding original printed materials in the Cherokee language is relatively rare. As you would expect, the Cherokee

Heritage Center has a substantial collection. But finding original physical artifacts such as the metal printing type, brass matrices or steel punches is exceedingly difficult.

Samples of Cherokee metal type can be found in small quantities at a variety of locations. Those first used for printing were excavated in the 1950s during an archeological dig at the New Echota site. They are stored at the Preservation Lab, part of the Georgia State Parks and Historic Sites.

Perhaps the most important remaining physical artifacts are two sets of brass matrices used to cast the lead type used in the 1800s. It is unclear if these are the originals produced in the the 1820s or perhaps some remade later that century. These can be found in the Western History Collection at the University of Oklahoma and were donated by the estate of Principal Chief J.B. Milam around 1950.

The fate of the valuable original steel punches, crafted by that nameless artisan at the New England Type Foundry, is completely unknown. With changes in technology through the years, they may have easily been discarded. But one can hope that someday they might be found, in a small box, on a dusty shelf, deep in some archive or storage room.

#### **CONTINUING THE INVESTIGATIONS**

It is surprising that such a remarkable project has so many fragmented and undocumented aspects. Research becomes like detective work. Good research, I think, takes you to places (literally and figuratively) that you cannot predict. Studying the manufacture of Cherokee printing type has taken me to archives such as Harvard’s Houghton Library, the Georgia State Archives and the Cherokee Heritage Center in Tahlequah. Much of this historical information is not conveniently found in books but in microfilmed newspapers, missionary letters, private diaries, and through the study of physical artifacts. As well, the project has led me to diverse topics such as metallurgy, archeology, cultural studies, state politics, missionary influences and, of course, an increasing understanding of Cherokee history.

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## Not So Trivial Trivia

Match the English and Cherokee words

- |               |            |
|---------------|------------|
| 1. Rabbit     | A. a ni    |
| 2. Bread      | B. o s da  |
| 3. Coffee     | C. di li   |
| 4. Strawberry | D. ji s du |
| 5. Hello      | E. tu ya   |
| 6. Ten        | F. o si yo |
| 7. Skunk      | G. ka wi   |
| 8. Locust     | H. ga du   |
| 9. Beans      | I. s go hi |
| 10. Good      | J. lo lo   |

Turn to Page 7 for the answers. If you wish to hear the words pronounced, go to [www.cherokee.org](http://www.cherokee.org) and look for the on-line English-Cherokee dictionary.