

Red Bird and Sequoyah: A Reply to Simek et al.

Kenneth Barnett Tankersley  and William Rex Weeks Jr.

Red Bird was a Cherokee murdered at the Red Bird River Petroglyph site (15Cy51) and buried at the Red Bird River Rockshelter (15Cy52) during the late eighteenth century, where he left an important record of traditional petroglyphs. His legacy is key to understanding the origins of Sequoyah's Cherokee Syllabary and its relationship to rock art. Personal testimonies of Red Bird's descendants are supported by primary documents and archaeological evidence, including the letters of Sequoyah's maternal uncle, John Watts, and prototypes of Cherokee Syllabary characters engraved at 15Cy52 in 1808, when members of Sequoyah's matrilineal family resided nearby.

Keywords: Native Americans, Cherokee, syllabary, historic archaeology, oral history, Cumberland Plateau, petroglyphs, North America, Kentucky

Red Bird fue un Cheroqui asesinado en el sitio de Red Bird River Petroglyph (15Cy51) y enterrado en Red Bird River Rockshelter (15Cy52) a fines del siglo XVIII, donde dejó un importante registro de petroglifos tradicionales. Su legado es clave para comprender los orígenes del silabario Cheroqui de Sequoyah y su relación con el arte rupestre. Los testimonios personales de los descendientes de Red Bird están respaldados por documentos primarios y evidencia arqueológica, incluidas las cartas del tío materno de Sequoyah, John Watts, y prototipos de caracteres silábicos Cheroqui grabados en 15Cy52 en 1808, cuando los miembros de la familia matrilineal de Sequoyah residían cerca.

Palabras clave: Nativos americanos, Cherokee, silabario, arqueología histórica, historia oral, Meseta Cumberland, petroglifos, Norteamérica Kentucky

Mark and remember. The future of American archaeology depends on directing mindful attention to the oral history of descendant communities as a source of inquiry and explanation (Whitely 2002). They offer an opportunity to embrace collaborative efforts and the integration of multivocal narratives (Damm 2005). Cherokee descendants of southeastern Kentucky and the archaeological record of 15Cy52 have a shared past that attests to the life, death, and burial of their ancestor Red Bird. Further, they attribute the marks of both Red Bird and Sequoyah on the walls of the rockshelter prior to the vandalism and collusion observable today. While acknowledging

that oral histories are complex, they are integral to a richly storied past (Anyon et al. 1997; Echo-Hawk 2000; Mason 2006:10). Thus, oral traditions and primary historical texts of Red Bird and his relationship with Sequoyah's family contribute valuable insights for advancing archaeological theory and practice in the study of rock art, writing, and the origins of the Cherokee Syllabary (Supplemental Materials).

The Brock family of southeastern Kentucky avow their Cherokee heritage from Red Bird through their matrilineal line (Addington 1972; Cole 1978; Miller 1906; Walker-Burns 1960). For more than seven generations, they have kept a tradition about the sites archaeologists

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now refer to as the Red Bird River Petroglyph site (15Cy51) and the Red Bird River Rockshelter (15Cy52; [Figure 1](#)). For them, these are places of continuing importance that contain traditional Cherokee glyphs inscribed by their ancestor. They remember where Red Bird was killed and interred, respectively and respectfully. Since Red Bird's slaughter, the Brocks have been to the best of their abilities the custodians of Red Bird's grave (Supplemental Table 1).

Simek and colleagues dismissed any historical documentation about Red Bird, his connection with sites 15Cy51 and 15Cy52, and relations to Sequoyah. Yet Red Bird's longtime association with members of Sequoyah's maternal family is well documented. Red Bird was a prominent Cherokee leader whose communications with Major Craig were noted in George Washington's correspondence on Indian affairs (September 4, 1792). Correspondences between Tennessee Governor Sevier and John Watts II (Sequoyah's maternal uncle), and other chiefs of the Cherokee Nation (March 5, 1797); Kentucky Governor Garrad (March 17, 1797); local law enforcement (March 19, 1797); and the leaders of the Cherokee Nation (March 28, 1797) indicate that Tennesseans murdered Red Bird in Clay County, Kentucky (Supplemental Table 2). John Gilbert was a witness, as recounted in detail by his son and grandson (Dickey 1898). Official legal proceedings attribute his namesake of the Red Bird River as the place of Red Bird's demise, with his marks on its ledges (Kentucky Court Order Books A, 1807–1815, and B, 1815–1832).

What is the earliest evidence of the Cherokee Syllabary? Walker and Sarbaugh (1993:85) identify a letter from Principal Chief Hicks to Superintendent McKenney, Office of Indian Affairs, on January 14, 1825, crediting George Guess with its invention. The first substantial biography of Guess and the origins of his syllabary occur in the *Cherokee Phoenix* on August 13, 1828, where his work is described as a process of experimentation that began with logographs incised in stone and culminated with syllabic characters penned on paper. The equation of Sequoyah with the alias of Guess was initially published in the *Niles Weekly Register* on September 5, 1829, by Samuel Lorenzo

Knapp, who professed to have obtained his information following an interview with him in Washington, DC, the year before (Supplemental Table 3).

Claiming descent from George Guess, Bird (1971) offered an alternative history in which the Cherokee Syllabary was ancient. According to Bird, his ancestor, also known as Sogwili rather than Sequoyah, was the last scribe who fought against assimilation to keep the syllabary from appropriation by Christian missionaries. Similar traditions are found among multiple other tribes (Weeks 2004). Hence, Bird (1971) challenged the notion that indigenous peoples of North America, and the Cherokee in particular, lacked writing prior to European conquest.

From our analysis of Coy and Fuller's (1969) archival, obliquely lit, color photographs, we argued that inscriptions on the wall of 15Cy52 represent a mixture of formative and consonant examples in the development of the Cherokee Syllabary dating to the first or second decades of the 1800s inspired by glyphs carved by Red Bird and others in the distant past (Weeks and Tankersley 2011). While we were unable to discern a word or phrase, the inscriptions may be meaningful, perhaps in the sense of syllables being enunciated as a song (Carroll et al. 2019; cf. Hymes 2004). We thought that the experimentation manifest at the site seemed contrary to Bird's (1971) account. Furthermore, we found that the site's inscriptions closely resembled the characters in an 1839 manuscript attributed to Sequoyah's own hand (GM 4926.488, Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma). We were particularly struck by the similarities of the character identified as *go*.

We also assumed that 15Cy52 was a logical and creative space for Sequoyah based on four pieces of contextual evidence. First, Sequoyah's maternal uncle, John Watts II, reported that Red Bird was murdered in what is today Clay County, Kentucky, in 1796. A mother's brother is among the most influential role models in a Cherokee male's life (Gilbert 1944:224, 235, 246, 274). Second, Sequoyah's maternal kin resided near 15Cy52 (Supplemental Table 4). Third, caves, crevices, and clefts in rocks were generally viewed as entrances to another world, and they were often associated with transformative

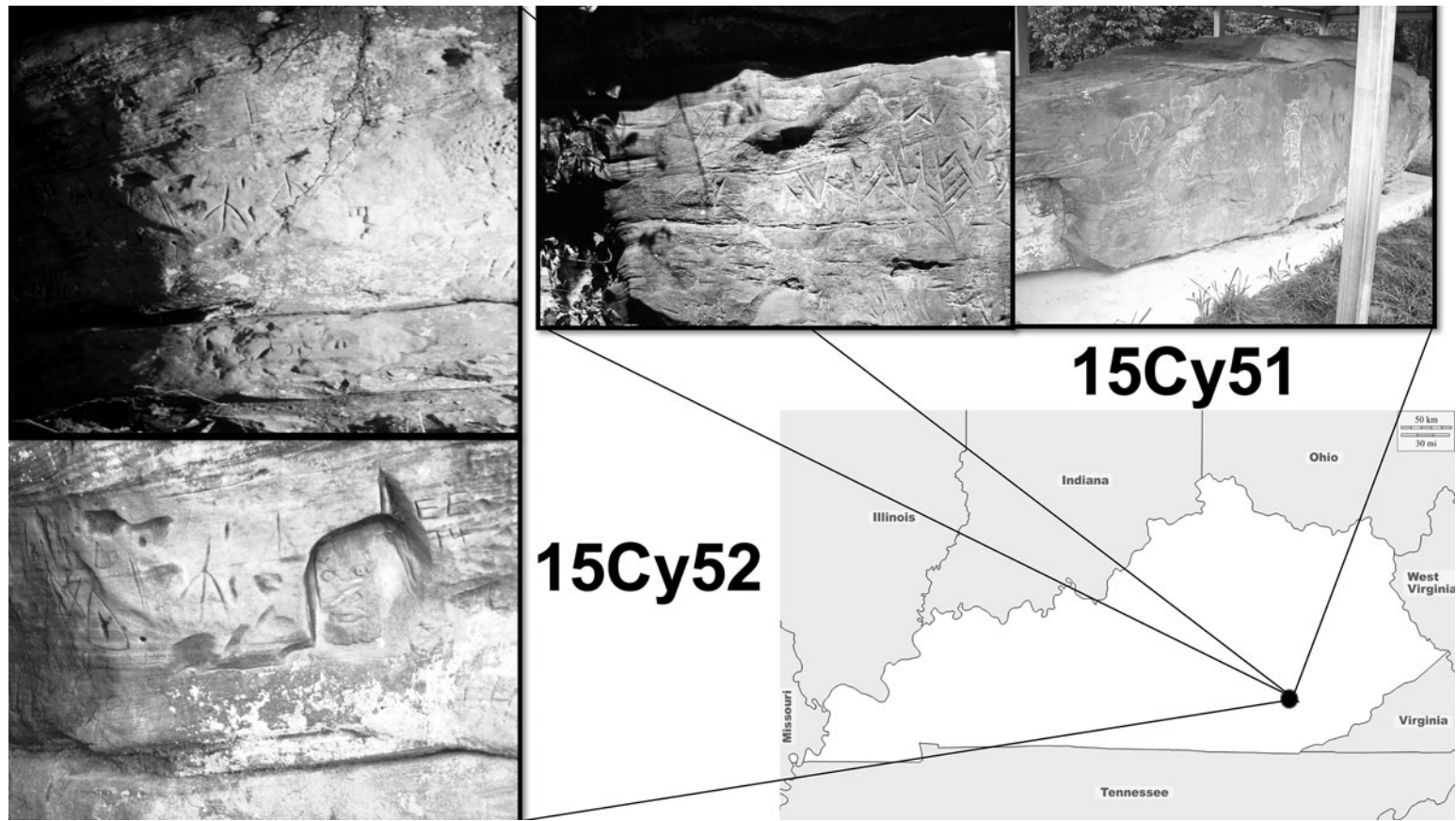


Figure 1. Locations of the Red Bird River Petroglyph site (15Cy51) and the Red Bird River Rockshelter (15Cy52) illustrating the petroglyphs at both sites before and after extensive Euro-American modifications and graffiti over the past ~50+ years.

COMMENT

significance in Cherokee traditions (Mooney 1900:293, 341–347). Fourth, general consensus among biographers suggests that Sequoyah traveled widely (Hoig 1995).

Simek and others (2019) suggest that we misrepresented Sequoyah's Cherokee identity by emphasizing his mixed paternal ancestry. We assume that they drew this conclusion from our brief remarks in passing, which we qualify with "allegedly" (Weeks and Tankersley 2011:990). Nonetheless, Cherokee paternity does play an important role in Cherokee kinship, even traditional kinship and descent systems that emphasize maternal relatives (Gilbert 1944:216–253).

Simek and colleagues (2019) base their interpretations on a recent field investigation of 15Cy52. Unfortunately, the inscriptions have been altered repeatedly and extensively over the past ~50 years (Weeks and Tankersley 2011; Figure 1; Supplemental Table 5). Thus, they were unable to recognize any of the symbols we had previously identified. Rather, they see the characters as graffiti probably made by children. They associate the symbols with recent tree carvings and twentieth-century inscriptions on local tombstones. However, the Brocks have a different perspective. They recall more than a century ago when the Cherokee inscriptions inside 15Cy52 were at eye level. Since that time, deforestation and erosion have reduced the rockshelter to a mere crawlway, and the rockshelter walls have been covered in graffiti (Figure 1; Supplemental Table 1).

Simek and others' (2019:Figure 7) description and figures fail to take into account site formation processes and background research on vandalism. This likely led to their omission of significant details of the inscriptions and the inclusion of others. When the petroglyphs are viewed from the perspective of the obliquely lit 1969 photographs by Coy and Fuller, the letter *N* is absent for their purported name "Nick," and likewise the *H* in their "Huds." Their *H* is clearly a *Y*-like symbol, while their letter *C* resembles an α . In addition, their letters *D* and *S* appear to be a single ω -like character. Similar inconsistencies are found with the upper symbols, which they interpret as the name "Ronter Hud." Their supposed letter *O* is more complex than they illustrate, as are the symbols they

believe are the letters *N* and *T*. Their letter *e* is a θ -like symbol. Finally, their letter *U* is a *V*-like symbol, which lacks a *D*-like symbol (Supplemental Table 5).

Gadugi is the Cherokee concept for "working together" within a community (Fogelson and Kutsche 1961; Mooney 1900). *Gadugi* is germane in terms of multicultural diplomacy, as we are grateful to Simek and colleagues (2019) for bringing the archaeology of the Cherokee Syllabary to the attention of the *American Antiquity* readership. We invite them to collaborate in a continuing effort to study the Red Bird River Shelter site (15Cy52).

Data Availability Statement. No original data were presented in this article.

Supplemental Materials. For supplementary material accompanying this essay, visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/aaq.2020.4>.

Supplemental Table 1. Descendants of Red Bird in Southeastern Kentucky.

Supplemental Table 2. References Concerning the Existence of Red Bird, His Murder, and His Burial in Clay County, Kentucky.

Supplemental Table 3. Biographies of Sequoyah Written during His Lifetime Documenting the Invention of the Cherokee Syllabary.

Supplemental Table 4. Selected Members of Sequoyah's Maternal Family.

Supplemental Table 5. History of Recent Modifications of Inscriptions at the Red Bird River Rockshelter Site (15Cy52).

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