



# SPHERE

# PROHUMAN FOUNDATION

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## Promoting Humanity for a Strong Civil Society: The Story of Nanyehi/Nancy Ward

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### Early Life: Learning to Build a Civil Society

Nanyehi, also known as Nancy Ward, is an important historical figure. She demonstrated that valuing humanity by promoting the respect of people is the best path toward creating a strong civil society. Such a society is created when people living in an area work together to create a community where everyone feels valued and contributes to the public good. Born in 1738 in the former Cherokee Nation capital Chota, in present-day Tennessee, Nanyehi saw early in life how her uncle Chief Attakullakulla showed the importance of valuing people first and making peace a priority by working with others civilly. By creating space for an open society that emphasized civil conversations and working together, Nanyehi's community identified ways to live alongside the colonists and experienced some relative peace before the American Revolution.



## Bravery and Resilience

In the 18th century, it was common to marry at a young age and have children. By the age of 17, Nanyehi was married to Tsu-la, also known as “Kingfisher,” and had two children. Although Nanyehi had witnessed peace through cooperation with other groups from her uncle, she had also witnessed warfare. She showed bravery and resilience through her leadership on a raid on the Muscogee (Creek) Nation where she fought alongside her husband and continued to fight after he was killed in the battle.

## Becoming a Leader

After the Cherokees won the battle, the tribal members viewed Nanyehi as a leader for putting the success of her community first. She earned the title Ghigau, “Beloved Woman.” She took on multiple civic duties for her tribe, including leading and representing the Women’s Council of Clan Representatives at the Cherokee General Council. Through her role, Nanyehi was able to decide the judgment of prisoners captured during battle.

## Cherokee Women’s Participation in Government

Nanyehi and other Cherokee women at the time participated in government affairs and were highly influential in their communities. This involvement is in distinct contrast to that of the role of women in the British colonial government. Colonial women did not experience the same liberties to participate in government. A legal principle known as coverture restricted the rights of married women to obtain the same economic and legal status as men. Additionally, the Cherokee Nation viewed lineage, or the way in which people are related to one another in a family line, as matrilineal, which means coming from the mother. In contrast, the British colonies viewed lineage as patriarchal, or coming from the father. These differences shaped the ways in which those communities would interact in the future and how Nanyehi, as well as other Cherokee women, would come to interact with the American government.

## A Rift in the Cherokee Community

Although Nanyehi and her uncle urged peace, the American Revolution created a rift in the Cherokee community. Her uncle’s son advocated for a raid on the colonial settlement along the Watauga River. Nanyehi, out of concern for the American colonists, released the prisoners she oversaw so they could go back to their community and prepare for the invasion. Although the raid was still carried out, her bravery to stand up to her family member to protect the lives of those she disagreed with demonstrated her faith in humanity. There were years of fighting across the Cherokee lands, but the Chota region was an exception because of Nanyehi’s reputation for preserving peace.

## Advocating for a Treaty

Nanyehi continued to identify ways to bridge the communities. In 1781, she advocated for a treaty between the Americans and Cherokees to end the fighting. She continued to take an active role in government relations between the two nations despite the different ways in which they approached women's roles in government. In 1785, the Cherokees and Americans created another treaty to preserve peace following Nanyehi's advocacy. Nanyehi encouraged her people to list their grievances with the new American government in a similar fashion as the Founders did with King George III.

Nanyehi fought for years to preserve peace, but fighting and the removal of tribes by the US government would continue. She actively opposed the government's removal of tribal communities into the 19th century and witnessed the transition of the role of women in the Cherokee government away from the old system and toward the ways of the American government.

## Nanyehi's Legacy

Nanyehi valued and believed in the principles of equality and peacemaking. Her lasting influence is complex because some Cherokee members view her as contributing to the assimilation of their people into the colonists' society. However, her legacy demonstrates how working toward strong, open, and free societies relies on people viewing each other as equals and with dignity. This view is core to the American Founding and its lasting legacy.

## Sources Consulted

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