

ABSTRACT  
THE CHEROKEE GOLD LOTTERY  
AND GEORGIA'S GUBERNATORIAL CAMPAIGN OF 1831

David Williams  
Valdosta State College

In the late 1820s, gold was discovered in the Appalachian foothills of north Georgia within what was then the Cherokee Nation. Gold fever swept through the region and by the autumn of 1829 Cherokee lands were being flooded by thousands of miners panning out the creeks and digging into the hillsides. The following year the Georgia General Assembly enacted legislation preparing the area for distribution to the state's citizens by lottery -- a lottery from which the native Cherokees would be barred. Although the lottery system had been in place for nearly thirty years without serious opposition, this time things were different. Never before had the land been so valuable. Many Georgians, including Governor George R. Gilmer, insisted that to gamble away "the state's" gold would be a terrible waste. Others, hoping to win a gold mine, favored a lottery. So divisive was the issue that it became the central issue of Georgia's gubernatorial campaign of 1831. The election would be a referendum on the lottery.

The incumbent Gilmer, with a tax reduction platform based on projected revenue from state operation of the gold mines, easily won the backing of his Troup Party. His Clark Party opponent, Wilson Lumpkin, made no promise of lower taxes, but enthusiastically supported the lottery.

By election day the voters of Georgia were, as the *Cherokee Phoenix* put it, "sick with the expectation of Indian land and gold." One disturbed Cherokee wrote of Georgia's electorate, "This class is numerous, and all ignorant--they do not know anything about writs of error, the constitution of the United States, etc. They know they are poor and wish to be rich, and believe that, if they have luck, they will draw a gold mine, and most everyone expects to have his luck in the lottery." On October 3, 1831, they sold their votes for the hope of Cherokee gold, and Wilson Lumpkin became the new governor.

On October 22, 1832, the lottery drums began to spin and names and tickets were drawn by the thousands. By May of the next year the lottery was completed and thousands of "fortunate drawers" flooded into the gold region, seeking out their newly acquired lands. The tide of whites sweeping the Cherokee Nation proved impossible to stop. Even so, most

Cherokees continued to resist. But in 1838, General Winfield Scott arrived in the gold region with 5,000 troops and began rounding up the Cherokees for a forced march to what is today Oklahoma. Of more than 14,000 people who set out on the march, almost five thousand died along the way. Small wonder that this came to be known as the Trail of Tears.

An opponent of the lottery once said that in distributing Cherokee lands by a spin of the drum, the state had gambled away her rich inheritance. But from a more objective point of view, it was surely the inheritance of the Cherokees that was gambled away by Georgia.