The Chickamauga Cherokees and the Spirit of the American Revolution

Good afternoon.

It is an honor to be here with you today at Brainerd Cemetery, and I want to thank the Daughters of the American Revolution for inviting me to take part in this flag-raising ceremony.

A flag-raising is a solemn thing. We sometimes forget that because we see flags every day. They fly outside courthouses and post offices, schools and churches, ballfields and cemeteries. They are stitched on uniforms and folded at gravesides. They are present at moments of celebration, mourning, sacrifice, and memory.

But a flag raised in a cemetery is not merely decoration. It is an act of remembrance. It says that this place matters. It says that the people buried here matter. It says that the story of this ground is part of the larger story of the nation.

And that is especially true here.

This cemetery stands near one of the most complicated and meaningful places in the history of this region. Nearby was the old Brainerd Mission. Nearby was the earlier home and trading place of John McDonald, the Scottish trader who lived among the Cherokees, married into the Cherokee world, and became one of the most important figures in the Chickamauga country. Nearby was the heart of a landscape that, in the age of the American Revolution, was not a quiet backwater, but a place of diplomacy, commerce, family, violence, alliance, and resistance.

Before I speak about that older history, I also want to pause over a loss much closer to our own time. Late last year, Larry Rose, Jr., longtime caretaker, protector, and guide at the Chief John Ross House in nearby Rossville, passed away. Larry was one of those people who understood that historic places do not preserve themselves. Buildings do not speak unless someone opens the door. Cemeteries do not remember unless someone tends them. Stories do not survive unless someone cares enough to tell them again.

It is fitting to remember him here, because the work of preserving history is often quiet work. It is not always grand. It is not always thanked. Sometimes it is

mowing grass, opening a gate, answering the same question for the hundredth time, standing watch over a place everyone else is too busy to notice. But without people like that, the past becomes invisible.

And if there is one thing I hope to do today, it is to make part of this landscape visible again.

We are approaching the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution. Across the nation, communities are preparing to commemorate the Declaration of Independence, the patriot cause, and the birth of the United States. That is right and proper. The American Revolution gave the world a new political language of liberty, rights, citizenship, and self-government. It inspired people far beyond the thirteen colonies. It remains one of the great turning points in human history.

But here, in Cherokee country, the Revolution was not simple.

That may be the most important thing to say at the beginning. The Revolution, as experienced here, was not merely a story of redcoats and patriots, tea and taxation, liberty and tyranny. It was also a struggle over land. It was a struggle over sovereignty. It was about the future of Native homelands; over who would control this valley, these creeks, these roads, these fields, these hunting grounds, these towns.

And because of that, when forced to choose a side in a war they did not ask for, most Cherokees did not side with the American revolutionaries. Most sided with the British.

We should not shy away from that fact. But we should also be careful how we understand it.

It would be easy, especially at a patriotic event, to say that those who sided with the British were simply on the wrong side. It would be easy to reduce them to enemies of liberty. But history is rarely so tidy. The Cherokees who supported the British were not opposing liberty as an abstract principle. They were defending their own liberty as they understood it: the liberty to remain on their land, to govern their own towns, to raise their children in their own country, and to resist a wave of settlement that seemed to grow stronger every year.

To the patriot settler, the Revolution promised freedom from imperial restraint. To many Cherokees, that same Revolution threatened to remove the last restraints on colonial expansion.

There is the tension. There is the hard truth. What one people experienced as liberation, another people could experience as danger.

And that does not make the American Revolution less important. It makes it more important. It means that as we approach America's 250th, we have an obligation not merely to celebrate the Revolution, but to understand it.

John McDonald's life helps us do that.

McDonald came from Scotland to South Carolina in the 1760s. By around 1770, he had married Ann Shorey, a Cherokee woman of a prominent family. She was the daughter of William Shorey, an interpreter connected to the old Fort Loudoun world, and Ghigooie, a Cherokee woman of the Bird Clan. Through that marriage, McDonald was not simply a white trader passing through Cherokee country. He became part of a Cherokee family network.

He served the British as a deputy or commissary in Indian affairs under John Stuart. He settled on Chickamauga Creek near its junction with the Tennessee River. He traded. He built relationships. He raised a family. He operated in that gray world where empire, kinship, commerce, and survival all overlapped.

The name Chickamauga itself has been interpreted as coming from a Muskogee phrase meaning "Place of the War Chief." Whether we take that translation literally or cautiously, the name proved prophetic.

In 1777, Dragging Canoe and his followers, frustrated with older Cherokee leaders who seemed willing to accommodate white expansion, moved into this area. They settled near McDonald, across Chickamauga Creek, and established what became known as Chickamauga Town. These Chickamauga Cherokees were not a separate tribe, though they are sometimes described that way. They were Cherokees, many of them younger and more militant, who believed that accommodation had failed and that resistance was necessary.

Here, then, was the setting: a British-connected trader with supply lines to Pensacola; a Cherokee resistance movement determined to defend its land; and an American Revolution turning the entire southern frontier into a battleground.

McDonald became a vital link. He could provide guns, ammunition, goods, intelligence, and connections. Chickamauga Town became a center of resistance to the Americans, and British agents used it as a base for operations in the Southwest. This was not a symbolic resistance. It was real war. Raids were launched. Frontier settlements were attacked. White men, women, and children suffered and died. American militia responded with devastating campaigns. Towns were burned. Cornfields were destroyed. Families fled. Hatred deepened.

No one should romanticize this violence. It was brutal. It was personal. It was often retaliatory. It drew in people who had little control over the great decisions being made in Philadelphia, London, Pensacola, New Orleans, or Cherokee council houses.

In 1779, American forces under Evan Shelby attacked Chickamauga Town and the surrounding settlements. They destroyed houses, commissaries, supplies, and large stores of corn. The Chickamauga warriors were not present at the time, but when they returned and saw what had happened, they moved farther away, west of Lookout Mountain, into what became known as the Five Lower Towns: Nickajack, Running Water, Long Island Town, Crow Town, and Stecoe, or Lookout Mountain Town.

The American Revolution officially ended in 1783. But here, in Chickamauga country, the war did not end in 1783.

That is another important truth. The Treaty of Paris may have ended the war between Britain and the United States, but it did not resolve the question that mattered most here: who would control the land? The Chickamauga resistance continued. Dragging Canoe and later John Watts kept up a long struggle against the expanding American frontier. McDonald, even after his official British role had ended, continued to live among and assist the militant Lower Town Cherokees.

At different moments, he dealt with the British, the Spanish, and eventually the Americans. That may sound slippery to modern ears, and perhaps it was. But it also reflected the world he lived in. The southern frontier was not a place of neat national boundaries. It was a world of overlapping claims. Britain, Spain, the United States, the Creeks, the Chickasaws, the Cherokees, and countless local settlements all maneuvered for advantage.

McDonald was not a simple man. He was not merely the kindly old trader of local legend. He was a partisan. He was a diplomat. He was a supplier of arms. He was a husband and father. He was a man trusted by many Cherokees and distrusted by many Americans. At times, American officials viewed him as dangerous. At other times, those same officials considered employing him because of his influence among the Lower Cherokees.

That is the borderlands world in one human life.

And that is the world that surrounded this place.

By 1800, McDonald was back on Chickamauga Creek, near his original homeplace. Moravian missionaries considered his place as a possible mission site. They described him as wealthy and influential among the Lower Cherokees. They noted his Cherokee family. They debated whether a mission should be located there, but some objected that the place was unhealthy and too far removed from the frontier.

Seventeen years later, in 1817, the American Board mission that became Brainerd was established on or near McDonald's old place. By then, the landscape had changed. The age of Chickamauga military resistance had ended. The Cherokee Nation was moving into a new period of political centralization, formal government, written law, education, Christianity, and diplomacy.

But the old questions had not gone away. They had merely changed form.

The grandson of John McDonald and Ann Shorey was John Ross. Ross would become Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation and one of the most important Native leaders in American history. He was not a warrior in the mold of Dragging Canoe. He did not lead raids against settlements. He did not try to defeat the United States on the battlefield.

Ross fought with petitions, letters, memorials, delegations, newspapers, lawyers, courts, and constitutional arguments. He took the political language of the United States seriously. He believed that treaties meant something. He believed that written promises should be honored. He believed that a people had the right to govern themselves on their own land.

In that sense, the struggle that began in the age of Chickamauga resistance did not disappear. It continued in another form.

Dragging Canoe resisted with arms. John Ross resisted with law. Both were responding to the same pressure: the threat that Cherokee land and Cherokee sovereignty would be swallowed by the expansion of the United States.

That is a difficult thing to say at a flag-raising ceremony. But it is not unpatriotic to say it. In fact, I would argue that it is deeply patriotic to say it.

A nation worthy of love is a nation strong enough to hear the truth about itself. America does not become weaker when we tell a fuller story. It becomes stronger. Patriotism is not the same thing as pretending. Patriotism is not historical amnesia. Patriotism is fidelity: fidelity to the best ideals of the nation, and fidelity to the truth of what happened.

The American flag we raise does not ask us to believe that America has always lived up to its promises. It asks us to remember that those promises matter.

That is why the Cherokee story belongs in the story of America's 250th anniversary.

The Chickamauga Cherokees were not American patriots in the usual DAR sense. They did not fight for American independence. Many fought against it. But they were participants in the same revolutionary age. They were people who understood that government, land, and liberty were bound together. They understood that distant powers could make decisions that destroyed local lives. They understood that a people who could not control their own homeland could not truly be free.

Those are themes the American Revolution forced into the open. Those are themes we still wrestle with.

To honor the patriot ancestors of the American Revolution, we do not have to dishonor the Cherokees who feared what American independence would bring. To tell the story of the Chickamaugas honestly does not diminish the courage of the men and women who built the United States. It simply reminds us that the founding of the United States was not experienced the same way by everyone who lived on this continent.

For many white settlers, the Revolution opened the West. For many Native people, it opened a door to dispossession.

Both things are true.

That is why places like Brainerd matter. This cemetery is not just a quiet old burial ground. It is part of a larger sacred landscape of memory. Around us are layers of history: Chickamauga resistance, missionary ambition, Cherokee adaptation, removal, Civil War, preservation, and local memory. There are roads here that carried traders, soldiers, missionaries, stagecoaches, and families in flight. There are creeks that witnessed the movement of warriors and children. There are fields that once belonged to a sovereign Native nation and later became part of Tennessee.

The ground remembers, whether we do or not.

And sometimes a place like this asks us to do more than recite the familiar story. It asks us to widen the story.

It asks us to remember John McDonald not simply as the grandfather of John Ross, and not simply as a figure in the legend of an old house, but as a man who stood at the center of a dangerous and changing world.

It asks us to remember Ann Shorey McDonald, whose Cherokee identity made McDonald's life among the Cherokees possible, and whose descendants would shape the future of this region.

It asks us to remember Dragging Canoe and the Chickamauga Cherokees, not as villains in someone else's frontier story, but as people defending their homeland in the only ways they believed remained to them.

It asks us to remember the missionaries at Brainerd, who came with their own convictions, their own blind spots, and their own hopes for Cherokee education and Christian conversion.

It asks us to remember John Ross, who emerged from this tangled world and tried, for decades, to make the United States honor its own stated principles.

And it asks us to remember people like Larry Rose, Jr., who in our own time understood that these places require caretakers, advocates, and witnesses.

As we raise the flag today, then, let us do so with gratitude, but also with humility.

Let us be grateful for the ideals of the American Revolution: liberty, representation, self-government, the dignity of citizenship, the belief that power must answer to principle.

Let us also be humble enough to recognize that those ideals were not applied equally to all people. The Cherokees knew that. African Americans knew that. Women knew that. Many poor and landless people knew that. The history of America has been, in large measure, the long and often painful struggle to make the promise of the Revolution more fully true.

That is not a reason for despair. It is a reason for responsibility.

The Daughters of the American Revolution have long understood the importance of lineage and memory. You know that we inherit more than names and dates. We inherit obligations. We inherit unfinished work. We inherit the duty to preserve, to mark, to teach, and to remember.

America's 250th anniversary should not be merely a birthday party. It should be an examination of conscience. It should be a renewal of vows.

And here at Brainerd Cemetery, those vows should include a commitment to tell the Cherokee story as part of the American story, not as a footnote to it.

The Chickamauga Cherokees and the patriots of the American Revolution were, in many ways, on opposing sides. But they were also caught in the same great transformation. Both understood that the future was being decided. Both understood that land and liberty were inseparable. Both understood that a people must fight, in one form or another, to preserve what they love.

The tragedy is that one people's freedom was too often built upon another people's loss.

The hope is that we can now tell the truth about that, and by telling the truth, become better stewards of the freedom we have inherited.

So when this flag rises today, may it rise over a fuller memory.

May it rise in honor of the patriot dead, and also in recognition of those Native people whose choices during the Revolution were shaped by fear, loyalty, kinship, and the defense of home.

May it rise over Brainerd Cemetery as a sign not of forgetting, but of remembrance.

May it remind us that liberty is not a possession to be congratulated over, but a trust to be guarded.

And may it call us, in this 250th anniversary season, to be brave enough to love our country in the fullness of truth.

Thank you.