

Thomas's Legion ^[1]

Thomas's Legion

by William L. Anderson, 2006

See also: [Deep Creek, Battle of](#) ^[2].



"William Holland Thomas." Image courtesy of the NC

Museum of History. ^[3] Thomas's Legion was formed during the [Civil War](#) ^[4] by [William Holland Thomas](#) ^[5], the only white man ever to become chief of the Eastern Band of [Cherokee Indians](#) ^[6]. Believing that North Carolinians would not tolerate Cherokee neutrality in the war and seeing an opportunity to procure state recognition of these Indians as citizens, Thomas enlisted more than 400 Cherokees in service to the South. He eventually commanded two companies of Cherokees and six companies of whites. Their first skirmish occurred in September 1862 at Baptist Gap, Tenn., near the Virginia state line. During the battle the grandson of the famous Junaluska was killed-infuriating the Cherokees, who scalped several Union soldiers. By the end of September, Thomas was promoted to colonel of his legion. This command comprised 11 infantry companies (the first 2 of which were Cherokee), 8 cavalry companies, and 1 light artillery battalion. It included the most prominent whites and Cherokees from western North Carolina and became known as [Thomas's Legion](#) ^[7] of Indians and Highlanders or simply Thomas's Legion, although it was often mistakenly called the 69th North Carolina Regiment.

In February 1864 Thomas's men were surprised ten miles west of Quallatown in the [Battle of Deep Creek](#) ^[2], which resulted in a Union victory. For the most part, the Cherokees saw little combat during the Civil War. They served primarily as guards and rounded up deserters. However, Thomas and his "legion" are credited with firing the last Confederate shots of the Civil War at Waynesville in May 1865.

References:

Vernon H. Crow, *Storm in the Mountains: Thomas' Confederate Legion of Cherokee Indians and Mountaineers* (1982).

E. Stanly Godbold Jr. and Mattie U. Russell, *Confederate Colonel and Cherokee Chief: The Life of William Holland Thomas* (1990).

Image Credit:

"William Holland Thomas." Image courtesy of the NC Museum of History. Available from http://www.ncmuseumofhistory.org/exhibits/civilwar/explore_section4m.html# ^[3] (accessed May 21, 2012).

Subjects:

[American Indians](#) ^[8]

[Cherokee Indians](#) ^[9]

[Civil War \(1861-1865\)](#) ^[10]

[War](#) ^[11]

Authors:

[Anderson, William L.](#) ^[12]

From:

[Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press.](#) ^[13]

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^[1] <https://ncpedia.org/thomass-legion> ^[2] <https://ncpedia.org/deep-creek-battle> ^[3]

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http://www.ncmuseumofhistory.org/exhibits/civilwar/explore_section4m.html [6] <https://ncpedia.org/choke/overview> [7]
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<https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/war> [12] <https://ncpedia.org/category/authors/anderson-william-l> [13] <https://ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/encyclopedia->