

## Book Review

### *Citizens of a Stolen Land*

By Stephen Kantrowitz (University of North Carolina Press, 2023)

Reviewed by Scott Fulton, December 9, 2024

The Ho-Chunk and their ancestors have inhabited the place we now call Wisconsin literally since “time immemorial” - traces of human activity found in southern Wisconsin have been dated by archeologists to at least 12,000 years ago. When European settlers began arriving in large numbers in southwest Wisconsin in the early 1800’s, initially attracted by the rich lead deposits which Native Americans had used for centuries, the process of trying to remove these indigenous people began in earnest. Starting in 1825 and concluding in 1837, the Ho-Chunk were coerced into signing a series of treaties which entailed giving up all their land in what is now the state of Wisconsin and moving across the Mississippi River to a reservation. Between 1832 and 1865, the Ho-Chunk were forcibly moved to five different reservations, ending up in a tiny plot of land near Sioux City, Iowa, where the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska still resides today.

In many ways, the story of the Ho-Chunk is very similar to that of the other Native American tribes during this era of coerced treaties and forced removal by the US federal government. Unlike most other tribes, however, the incredibly persistent but peaceful resistance of the Ho-Chunk ultimately gained them the legal right as individuals to homestead and own land in Wisconsin, giving them a strong presence here today. *Citizens of a Stolen Land* is the story of the removal of the Ho-Chunk, their dogged resistance, and their skillful use of the changing political landscape in post-Civil War America to regain the ability to settle in the land they had always loved.

Even as the removal began, many Ho-Chunk refused to leave, instead taking advantage of their deep knowledge of the landscape and how to live on it to stay behind in the shadows. Many of those who were forced to move through military action returned on foot or by canoe, one-by-one and in small groups. Often, they were rounded up and sent back to the current reservation, but the flow of “returnees” never stopped.

Those Ho-Chunk who were in Wisconsin began to homestead and purchase land as individuals and make a living in the growing communities just like every other settler. Although many of the newcomers wanted them gone, most Ho-Chunk were friendly, peaceful neighbors, and they gradually gained quite a bit of local support and even

protection. With this slow, gradual process, the Ho-Chunk integrated themselves back into Wisconsin life, even though under the law they were not allowed to be there.

In the years following the Civil War, the Reconstruction movement created full citizenship for all newly freed African American slaves, with all the legal, political, and economic rights that entails. The Ho-Chunk realized that these same principles should be applied to them and began to lobby for the legal right to at least homestead and own land where they had lived. The congressional delegation from Wisconsin opposed this, but those from other states became strong allies. In 1875 the Indian Homestead Act passed, granting full legal rights of Indians to homestead and own land, provided they were willing to fully abide by both federal and state laws. With this new law in place, a large number of Ho-Chunk were able to freely return from across the Mississippi River to Wisconsin. The land they owned was and is theirs as property, not subject to the policies of allocation and redistribution that were about to strip much of the treaty-granted reservation land from other tribes.

The Ho-Chunk (and other Indians) would not become full-fledged United States citizens until 1924, and the Ho-Chunk Nation of Wisconsin would not be formally recognized as a tribe by the federal government until 1963. However, their unusual early adoption of the European concept of property ownership gave them the tool they needed to non-violently carve out a guaranteed place in the state that was the land that had always been their home.

The author Stephen Kantrowitz is currently Plaenert-Bascom and Vilas Distinguished Achievements Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. His work focuses on the history of race, citizenship, and Native-settler interaction in nineteenth-century United States, with a particular interest in the era that spans the antebellum, Civil War, and postbellum eras. Although Kantrowitz is not a Native American himself, he fully credits the deep collaboration with many people from the Ho-Chunk Nation of Wisconsin for the conception, writing, and editing of this book.

As our [Land Acknowledgement Minute](#) states, the Meetinghouse sits on part of the ancestral home of the Ho-Chunk. In that Minute, we as a Meeting committed to educating ourselves about the history of this ancient culture and nation. *Citizens of a Stolen Land* is both a well-told, fascinating story and a very good place to begin or continue that education process.