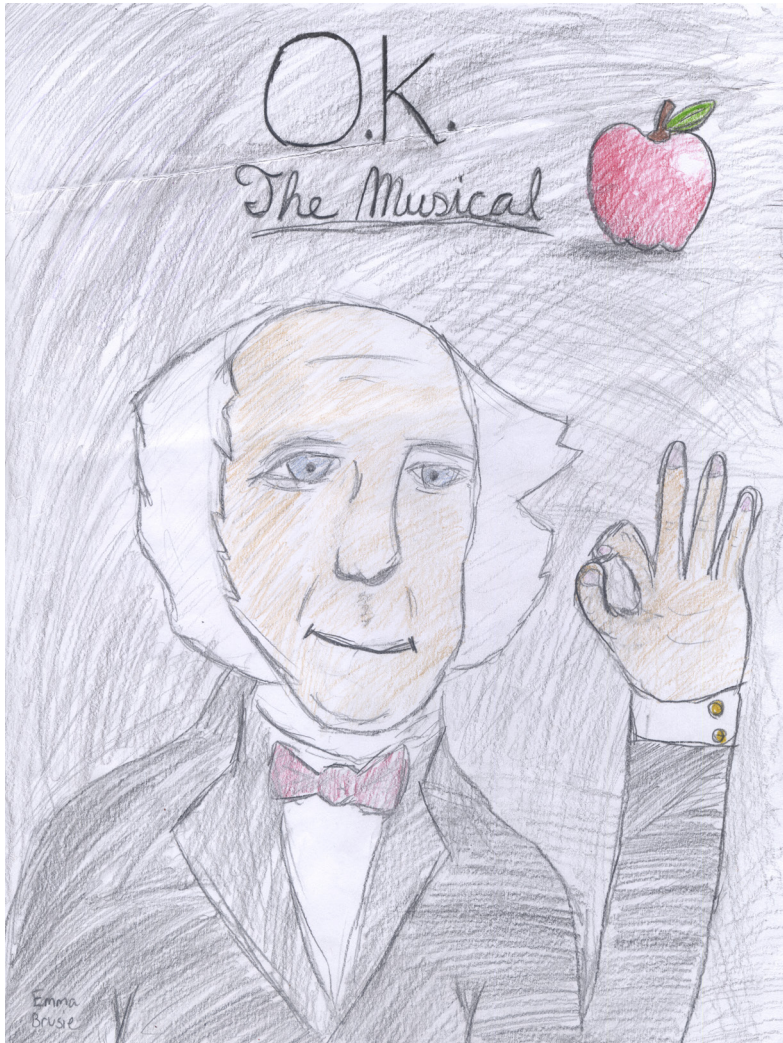


O.K. – The Musical

(The Many Ghosts of Martin Van Buren)

by Christopher Kline



Poster design by Emma Brusie from Ichabod Crane Central, 2014

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O.K. – THE MUSICAL

In 2014 I began working on *O.K.*, an ongoing project based around the history and lore of my hometown of Kinderhook in New York State. Kinderhook is a rural township about 220km north of New York City which is composed of mostly forest, farmland, and a few villages, with a total population of around 8,500 residents. The town is not especially known, even in the region, but is host to a variety of often forgotten stories and people which connect it, sometimes tenuously, to the broader history of the US and the world.

The most notable of these anecdotes is that 8th US President Martin Van Buren (in office from 1837-1841) was born and raised there, leading to his nickname “Old Kinderhook”. During a language fad in the late 1830s in which misspelled abbreviations became popular, the word “O.K.” (a comic misspelling of “all correct”) came into use along with a slew of others. The trend and the abbreviations it brought with it would’ve all faded into obscurity, except that Van Buren’s re-election campaign had tried to capitalize on the trend with slogans like “O.K. is O.K.!” and various “O.K. Clubs” of supporters sprung up around the country, bringing nation-wide popularity to the term. Though Van Buren is a largely forgotten figure, the term “O.K.” went on to become the most universally used and understood word in the world.

Oriented around the propagation of “O.K.” as a metaphor for the subtle permeation of small-town American idiosyncrasies into broader cultural forms, my project explores early cultural exports and anomalies originating in Kinderhook, as well as recent local developments there since post-industrialization. *O.K.* synthesizes and expands on the region’s lore and attempts to construct a fresh overview of local history through the exposition of historical documents, videos, replicas, interpretive research, and collaborations with local students, craftspeople, filmmakers, and other community members.

Through the process of working on the project, I began searching for a centralized format which was flexible, inclusive, and relevant to the community of Kinderhook itself. While the project often manifests as installations, artworks or texts, the linchpin has become the creation of an expansive community theatre musical developed slowly, scene by scene, over several years through workshops, performances and even a “TV show”. In contrast to a history book written from a singular voice, the musical is participatory, developed with people from many different countries, bringing in widely varied understandings and visions. It is my intention that this method yields a musical that is well-rounded and informed, historically relevant and also entertaining, so that it may at once be reabsorbed into Kinderhook’s own history while spreading its story to much wider audiences, thereby “completing the loop” in utilizing the metaphor of the propagation of “O.K.” itself.

Here at La Casa Encendida I am presenting *O.K. – The Musical* (*The Many Ghosts of Martin Van Buren*), a scene which depicts the late President Van Buren sitting in his study at his Kinderhook home *Lindenwald*. As he attempts to write his memoirs he is pestered by ghosts of his past, namely Joseph Cinqué who led the Amistad Slave Revolt and John Ross who was the Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation from 1828-66, during the Trail of Tears death march in which 4,000 of his people perished during forced relocation.

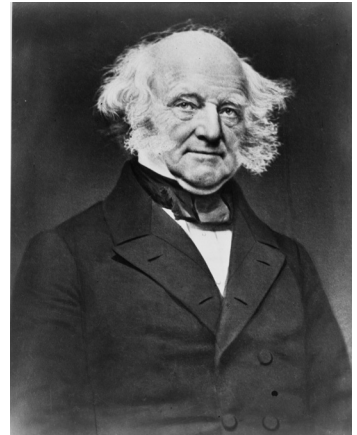
In reality, Van Buren’s sprawling and dreadfully boring 820-page autobiography gives no mention to the Amistad case, and very little mention to slavery, Indian Removal or even American Indians at all, despite these topics now widely seen as central issues of the era of his presidency due to their flagrant violation of the contemporary notion of Human Rights. Whether he had any regrets about either the Amistad case or Indian Removal will likely never be known since he destroyed much of his correspondence.

MARTIN VAN BUREN

Martin Van Buren was born in Kinderhook in 1782 to a Dutch-American tavern keeper. He was the first US President born in the United States (previous presidents had all been born in the pre-independence colonies), and the only president for whom English was a second language. Known to be a masterful politician, he rose to Governor of New York State and was later selected as Andrew Jackson's Vice President. His many nicknames included: The Red Fox, O.K.(Old Kinderhook), The Little Magician, Matty The Enhancer, The Careful Dutchman, The American Talleyrand, and Martin Van Ruin.

Van Buren helped to pioneer what came to be known as “political machines” – a system of behind-the-scenes deals and private campaign promises also known as the “spoils system” in which political support is rewarded with high-ranking positions, money and other advantages. A true politician, he was shrewd in making his ideology public, constant keeping his allies and enemies wondering. During his presidency he attempted to balance the country's divisions over slavery, forming many allies in the slave-owning south, while also disallowing the annexation of Texas or admitting Missouri as a slave state, which would throw off the balance of pro- vs anti-slavery states.

Despite his prowess, his inability to quell the Financial Panic of 1837 and his reputation for having extravagant taste, a common subject of political cartoons of the time, made him unpopular, and he failed to gain reelection in 1840. Despite his clear opposition to the nation-wide abolition of slavery during his tenure, he later ran for President again in 1848 on the Free Soil Party ticket, an anti-slavery party, but failed to gain any electoral votes.



Van Buren at age 73

Political Cartoon picturing Van Buren treading on the constitution while being crowned by a demon. He is wearing a princely cloak of shinplasters, a devalued currency used during the Financial Panic, 1837.

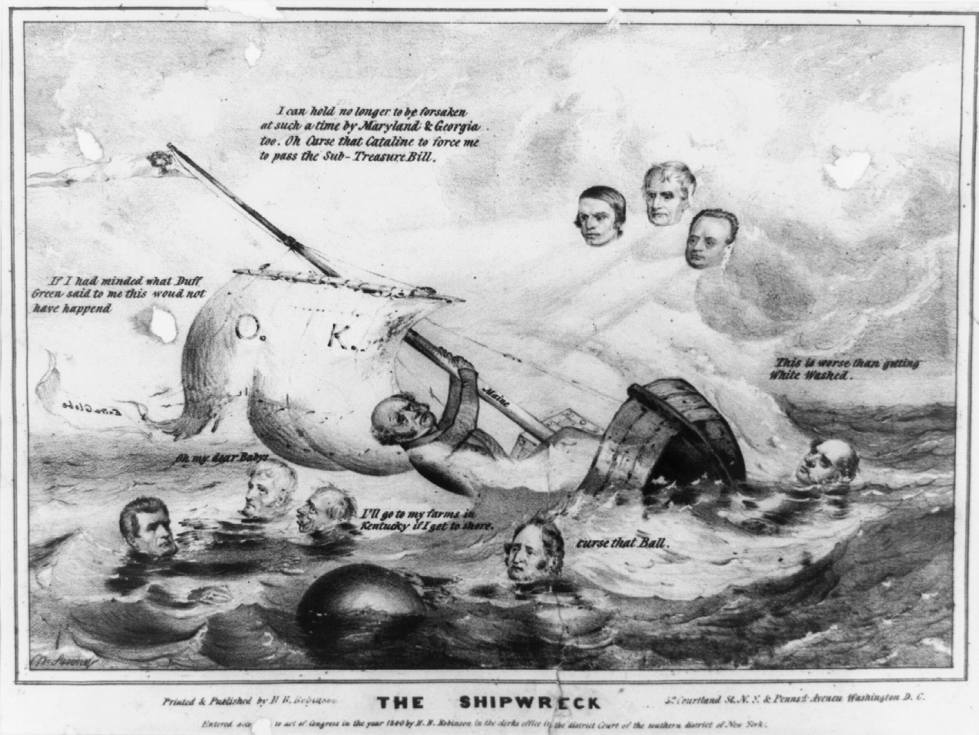


HIGH PLACES IN GOVERNMENT LIKE STEEP ROCKS ONLY ACCESSIBLE TO EAGLES AND REPTILES ~

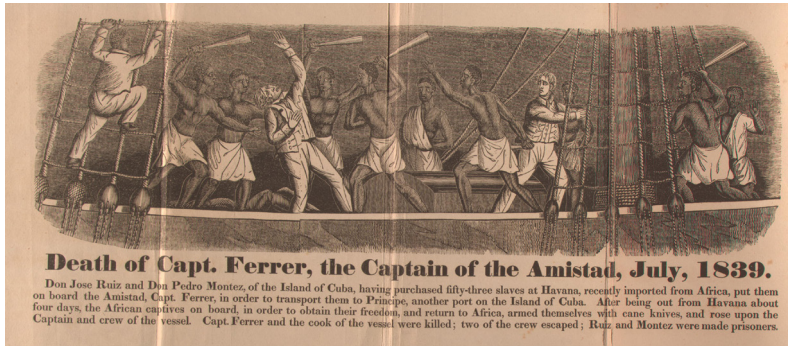
Published April 1836 by the proprietor H. B. Robinson, 48 Courtland St. New York

Above: Political cartoon depicting Van Buren as snake and Andrew Jackson as a turtle, 1836.

Below: Political cartoon depicting the Van Buren campaign as a sinking ship (note the "O.K."), 1840.



UNITED STATES V. THE AMISTAD



1840 engraving picturing the Amistad Slave Revolt

In July of 1839 a slave ship called La Amistad departed from Havana for another port in Cuba. The 53 captives on board were from the Mende people, kidnapped in Sierra Leon and illegally sold into slavery. Using a file found and hidden by a woman on board, Sengbe Pieh, later known as Joseph Cinqué, cut through his shackles and freed the other captives who then stormed the deck armed with machetes and sugar cane knives. They killed the captain and cook and forced the remaining crew to sail them east toward Africa. The crew secretly sailed North along the US coast until August 26th when the boat was seized by the US military near Long Island, New York while some of the Mende had gone to shore for water and supplies.

A lengthy and complicated court battle ensued, debating whether the Mende were property or people, freemen or criminals, and what their fate should be. The Spanish government claimed that only Spain had jurisdiction over the case and that the Africans be returned to them as legal cargo. A US lieutenant filed to claim them himself as 'property seized on the high seas'. Two other American men filed a claim to the slaves as 'salvage', saying they were the first to discover the boat. Two surviving crew members claimed the slaves should be returned to them. The case was further complicated by the fact that La Amistad had been brought to Connecticut, a state where slavery was still legal, rather than New York.

President Van Buren, wanting to maintain good relations with Spain, but especially his voter base in the South, had a ship sent to Connecticut so that if the verdict was that the slaves should be returned



as property, the boat would immediately sail to Cuba before a legal appeal could be filed. However, the District Court found that the Mende captives should go free, at which point Van Buren pushed the District Attorney to file an immediate appeal. The Appeals Court upheld the previous verdict that the captives should go free, at which point the U.S. Attorney (appointed by the President) filed a second appeal and the case was forced to the Supreme Court.

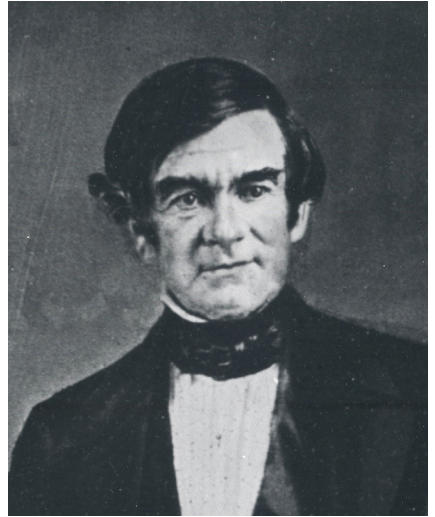
Eventually the Supreme Court also sided with the District Court stating "unlawfully kidnapped, and forcibly and wrongfully carried on board a certain vessel" and on March 9, 1841, the Mende captives were declared free. Abolitionists helped to raise money for them to return to their homes in Sierra Leon, but by the time they returned in 1842 their village had been destroyed and families sold into slavery.

Joseph Cinqué, (formerly Sengbe Pieh)

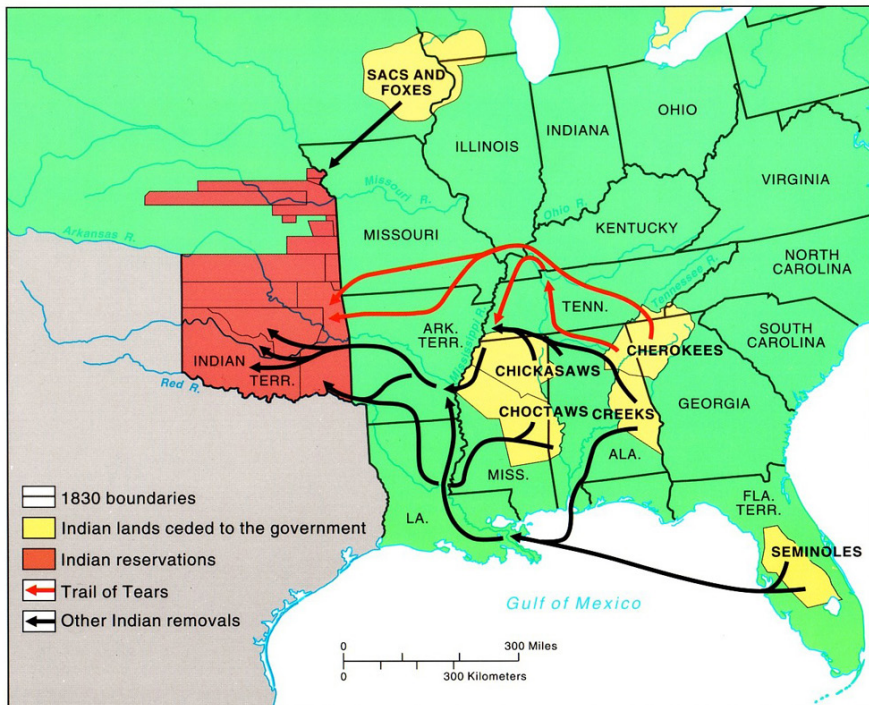
THE TRAIL OF TEARS

The Indian Removal Act of 1830 was passed during the presidency of Andrew Jackson while Van Buren was Jackson's Secretary of State. The act was designed to remove tribes from the south-western US to land west of the Mississippi River despite previous treaties granting them autonomy. Of particular historical note is the forced removal of the Cherokee people from their land in Georgia and bordering states. White southerners were eager to claim vast tracts of property considered by the tribes to be their ancestral homeland, especially after gold was discovered there in 1828.

Set into action by the Indian Removal Act, a treaty was later signed by a small minority faction of the Cherokees who the US government recognized as their valid representatives despite contrary claims of the tribal council and Principal Chief. The Treaty of New Echota granted all of the tribe's territory to the US in exchange for 5 million dollars and new land out west. Cherokee Chief John Ross petitioned President Van Buren with 16,000 signatures, nearly the entire Cherokee tribe, but Van Buren ignored the petition and called for their immediate removal with military oversight. Between 2,000 and 6,000 Cherokee men, women and children died during the "forced march" from disease, exposure to extreme weather, and lack of rations. The dead included Ross' wife Quatie.



John Ross, Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation from 1828-66



Map depicting the Trail of Tears and other "Indian Removals" of the era

VAN BUREN'S LEGACY

Today Van Buren is all but forgotten, mostly eclipsed by the reputation of his Indian-killing predecessor, friend, and face of the twenty-dollar bill, Andrew Jackson. Though the history of *The Amistad* and *The Trail of Tears* are still taught in US History classes, Van Buren's name is seldom remembered, not even in connection with the term "O.K."

The one place where his shadow does still loom is indeed in old Kinderhook itself, where he is presented as the town's "favorite son", a sort of lovable rascal whose name garners several local historic markers. His home *Lindenwald*, is host to school tours and nature trails. Due to his seeming irrelevance most local residents know only a few anecdotes about him: that he was short (actually he was 5'6", which was only a bit below average at the time), that he coined the term O.K. (which he didn't, though he did popularize it), and that he was a U.S. President born and raised in Kinderhook. People often know stories about *Lindenwald*— that perhaps it's haunted by the ghost of his head servant "Aunt Sally" who sometimes bakes bread or takes down all of the curtains in the night, or by Aaron Burr who hid at Lindenwald after killing Alexander Hamilton in a duel, or perhaps by Van Buren, the Red Fox himself.

Locally, his role in Indian Removal and ethnic cleansing are rarely considered, and his stern opposition to the abolition of human slavery during his tenure as President is usually forgiven. It is sometimes claimed that perhaps Van Buren was simply a "man of his time", the well-trodden apologist's term for figures whose views and acts are later held as reprehensible. Andrew Jackson, for one, claimed to have seen the Indian Removal as "paternalism", a way of saving the Indians from their inevitable demise if they stayed on their lands, his act of mercy. However, the Indian Removal Act was by no means popular in the entire United States at the time, facing fierce opposition in the North-East and from Christian groups, passing by only 101-97 votes in Congress with 11 abstaining.

In 1838 esteemed writer and thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson penned a famous open letter to Martin Van Buren regarding the Cherokee Removal in which he asked: "Will the American government steal? Will it lie? Will it kill? (...) now the steps of this crime follow each other so fast, at such fatally quick time, that the millions of virtuous citizens, whose agents the government are, have no place to interpose, and must shut their eyes until the last howl and wailing of these tormented villages and tribes shall afflict the ear of the world."



Lindenwald, Van Buren's home he purchased during his presidency, today a national historic site, supposedly haunted

While there may seem to be little need to unearth Van Buren as a villain of history, it is still worth pointing out that his use of ideological ambiguity in service of his own desire for power and his pioneering of the spoils system as an architect of Jacksonian Democracy set a precedent for the kind of calculated, conniving politics the US remains steeped in today.