First Lady, Deputy Chief Warner, Speaker Shambaugh, members of the Council, members of the cabinet, members of the judiciary, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

We are gathered in our capital city 185 years after our ancestors completed that brutal and destructive forced removal at the hands of the United States.

We gather here 185 years after our ancestors nearly succumbed to what divided them but had the wisdom to lean on what united them.

We gather here 185 years after our ancestors forged the Act of Union, crafted a new constitution, and kept the Cherokee Nation whole as a single and unbroken body politic.

Our ancestors in the most difficult of times kept alive what it means to be Cherokee.

What drove our ancestors was the idea that they had a shared culture, a shared history and the belief that they owed something to each other if the Cherokee people were to have a shared future.

Our ancestors did not have unanimity of thought, but they had unanimity of purpose.

They moved with a sense of urgency.

Those ideas, that unity of purpose and that urgency informs everything that the Hoskin Warner administration and this Council undertakes.

That is why I can report to the Cherokee people that the state of this great nation is strong.

There is much to report. But, if you had to judge our nation by one action, let it be this: when Cherokee Nation had the opportunity to help feed low-income Oklahoma children this summer we said yes.

We are the Nation that in recent years stared down the foes of tribal sovereignty, asserted our treaty rights and built stronger alliances with our friends and neighbors.

We are a Nation committing historic resources to the health, education and welfare of our people.

All of this means that the generation of Cherokees coming up can be a generation of Cherokees that is healthier, better educated and better positioned to seize the great opportunities of this century than any generation of Cherokees before it.

It means that Cherokees in their twilight can live with greater security and greater dignity.

For all of us, it means our communities keep improving.

The state of the Nation is strong, but we cannot rest. We must work in the year ahead to make it stronger.

We are the Nation that refuses to let our language and culture slip away. Instead, we are in the midst of a Cherokee renaissance.

The Artist Recovery Act has injected millions of dollars into the great and growing community of Cherokee artists and a new generation is emerging.

We are purchasing amazing art for the public to enjoy. We are giving artists a chance to teach classes in our communities. We are helping artists get a foothold in the marketplace with modern marketing techniques.

The Durbin Feeling Language Act, which I signed in January, says we should never spend less than a record setting $18 million a year on language preservation.

The Language budget Deputy Chief and I just sent the Council for the coming year calls for $20.5 million dollars.

That means more immersion students, more translation work, more leveraging high tech to make our language accessible, more master apprentice students, more jobs in the language, and more care for our elder fluent speakers.

On language and culture, we refuse to stand still. We just broke ground on a new language immersion middle school.

The Cherokee language is making a comeback.

Of course, education is the key to our future. That is why I am pleased to report that this year’s list of scholarship recipients is over 6,700, a new record that includes over a thousand at-large Cherokees.

And, this month Deputy Chief Warner and I will send to the Council the Sequoyah Schools Capital Plan.

The plan is a $65 million investment to transform our campus into a 21st century education complex worthy of the faculty, administrators, staff and students.

Remodeled dorms, a new academic building and a performing arts center are just some of the ways we will transform that campus.

Whether it is the thousands of college graduates or those in one of our career training programs each year, the generation of Cherokees coming up need jobs.

Although we are the proud employer of 14,000 worldwide, small businesses remain the biggest driver of the economy.

I am excited to announce that we have reached an historic agreement with the United States Department of Treasury to support Cherokee entrepreneurs and small business owners over the next seven years. We are opening a pool of $86 million dollars in loan support to grow and expand Cherokee small businesses.

Our most basic duty, of course, is keeping our citizens safe.

Last year our criminal justice system handled over 5,500 cases. Next year it could be even higher.

My fellow Cherokees we must take care that our criminal justice system doesn’t consume us.

Yes, we must make sure we have a system that protects the public and wraps a blanket of protection around victims.

But our system must treat everyone, even offenders, with dignity.

If a citizen of our Nation wants a path to accountability, healing and redemption, then we should help our fellow Cherokee find that path.

That’s why Deputy Chief and I will work with the Council and the judiciary to establish a new drug court, sentencing reform and an expansion of our reentry program.

A key measure of the strength of our Nation is our relationship with the State of Oklahoma. What will weigh on us most this year is the status of our motor vehicle compact.

Our tag compact has generated $258 million since 2002 that we share with our friends and neighbors and invest in all Oklahomans’ future.

That’s the agreement that generates millions and millions of dollars annually for public education.

That’s the agreement that has paved miles and miles of roads and fixed dozens and dozens of bridges.

It’s the agreement that sends much needed funding to local and county law enforcement agencies and first responders every year.

Our tag compact is the agreement that shares real time license plate data with the state so that everyone is safe and accountable during a traffic stop.

It’s the agreement that enables us to provide car tags to our at large brothers and sisters across the State of Oklahoma.

 At the end of this year, we will either have a motor vehicle tag compact, or we won’t.

But, let me be clear, no matter what happens with our compact, come January 1, 2025, we will continue issuing vehicle tags and titles to our citizens within the reservation.

The only question will be whether the state of Oklahoma wants to continue to share in the benefits of that system.

If we can negotiate a compact with Governor Kevin Stitt we will. But it needs to be a fair compact.

Will we continue to share our car tag revenue with the State of Oklahoma after December 31 of this year? That depends on Governor Stitt.

I ask Governor Stitt to put aside his hostility to tribal sovereignty, stop turning state / tribal relations into some type of contest and to simply use common sense and treat the Cherokee Nation with respect.

For the Cherokee people housing is not just an important issue. The success or failure of housing either unleashes that great Cherokee potential for this great Cherokee century, or it holds us back.

Housing conditions either enables a generation of Cherokees to build wealth and build strong communities, or it saps a generation of its resources and weakens us at the grass roots.

That’s why in 2019, Deputy Chief Warner and I proposed the Housing, Jobs and Sustainable Communities Act. That law is the largest housing investment in Cherokee history.

In the five years since the approval of the Housing Jobs and Sustainable Communities Act, the Housing Authority of the Cherokee Nation completed over 2,800 individual housing projects from rehabs to new homes. Compare that with around 1,600 projects with funds provided under the federal NAHSDA law in that same time period.

We’ve built 363 new homes, including four housing additions. People who had been waiting for years to be served are now living in their new homes.

As proud as we are of that investment and that progress, the time has come to acknowledge that it has not been enough.

We are conducting the first comprehensive study of our housing conditions, looking at our needs over the next decade.

I received a preview of the study. The study will reveal what the Deputy Chief, Council members and I already know: too many of our fellow Cherokees continue to struggle when it comes to housing.

We are in a crisis, a crisis that is bigger than the Cherokee Nation. It stretches across this region, this state and the entire country.

Here at home, housing is in short supply. Too much of it is substandard. There are too many elders in need of assistance that we have not yet reached.

Rent is putting too much pressure on too many families. Housing costs sap the financial strength of too many citizens, especially those who can least afford it.

Too few of our fellow citizens have a path to homeownership.

Overall, the study will show a $1.75 billion dollar gap in housing for this region over the next decade.

This is not a crisis caused by the Cherokee Nation. It is not a crisis that falls only on the Cherokee Nation.

But it is a crisis that commands our attention.

We are not a people who sit back and wait for others to come to the rescue. We are a people meant to lead and we must lead on housing.

The Housing, Jobs and Sustainable Communities Act expires in 12 months.

We must decide as a government whether to return to the days of waiting on the United States to come to the rescue, to hand down whatever inadequate funds Congress happens to approve.

Deputy Chief Warner and I will send to the Council not just another temporary Housing, Jobs and Sustainable Communities Act, but a permanent law.

Our plan commits $40 million dollars to the cause of housing and community buildings every three years into perpetuity. That is $40 million on top of what the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development provides under NAHSDA and it will include our own business profits.

We cannot solve the housing crisis if we stand still. If we stand still on housing, we will fall behind and we are not a people who were meant to fall behind.

And, it’s not just housing. Under the Housing, Jobs and Sustainable Communities Act, we have built 5 new community buildings, with two more under construction and four more projects out for bid.

We’ve repaired or expanded dozens more and locked in over $1 million in energy savings with our solar panel project.

 If anyone needs to understand the value of community buildings, go to South Coffeyville or Dewey. Take a look at Brushy or Baron. Look at the plans for that new ball field in Greasy.

Go see families gathering at that new park in Kenwood or playing basketball in the new Woody Hair Center. Spend time in Marble City where elders are speaking Cherokee inside and kids are playing outside. The list goes on and on.

Our New Housing Jobs and Sustainable Communities Act will be all about building up Cherokee communities during this great Cherokee century and we won’t leave any community behind.

Last year Deputy Chief Warner and I proposed Gadugi Corps. Last December the Council approved the Gadugi Corp Volunteer and National Service Act.

We now have a new program to harness the volunteer spirit that resides in the heart of every Cherokee and in every Cherokee community.

Under the leadership of Shawn Crittenden, people of all ages, from here on the reservation and across the country, answered the call to volunteer and national service.

Gadugi Corp volunteers logged 635 hours helping with disaster recovery and students earned 365 community service hours towards college scholarships. We trained community members in disaster response, and volunteers helped 80 kids at our first Gadugi Corps reading camp in Peavine.

At-large citizens came home to volunteer. We placed our first four Gadugi Corps National Service Participants with community organizations. Our volunteer database now exceeds 1,000.

This year Deputy Chief Warner and I propose we go further by doubling spending on this new and promising program. Gadugi Corps is based on something simple: Cherokee Nation is strongest when we build it from the grass roots up, not the top down.

No issue commands more of this nation’s attention, time and resources than health care.

Our mission is not to build a health system that is adequate, but to build a world class system of wellness for the Cherokee people.

When Deputy Chief Warner and I took office, Cherokee Nation’s health system was already the largest in Indian Country with 1.3 million patient visits per year.

This year we are on track for 2 million patient visits per year.

Staffing is up, access is up, and quality continues to rise.

Since 2019 we finished some amazing projects that we inherited and we have just kept moving forward.

We expanded four of our health centers. We began construction on the Carson Wellness Center in Stillwell and in 2026 we will break ground on a wellness center to replace Markoma here in Tahlequah.

The construction of our $450 million hospital in Tahlequah, which will double our in-patient capacity, is right on track.

The $85 million Salina health center, which will triple our capacity and includes a wellness center, is right on track.

I was never prouder than I was a couple of weeks ago when we broke ground on a facility south of Tahlequah.

It was the vision of our First Lady. It was made possible by the Public Health and Wellness Funds Act.

It is a $25 million drug treatment center built for Cherokees, by Cherokees, and we made the opioid industry pay for every, single penny of it.

My fellow Cherokees when it comes to health care we are just warming up.

I was born in 1975 in the Claremore Indian Hospital. My father was born there. My grandfather received his health care there. Thousands of Cherokee citizens and citizens of other tribes get their care there each year.

That facility has always been staffed by wonderful people who work hard to deliver great healthcare.

But, the truth is the Claremore Indian Hospital operates in a federal system, Indian Health Service, that has never adequately delivered healthcare.

IHS is $26 billion dollars behind on building healthcare clinics and hospitals for Indian Country. IHS’ budget is seven times less than it should be.

Quite simply we have proven that when Cherokees operate our own health care system we do it better.

And so, Mr. Speaker I will send to the Council legislation for Cherokee Nation to take ownership and control of the Claremore Indian Hospital by the end of 2025.

In the year ahead we are going to continue to take control of our health care destiny and build towards that world class system of wellness.

My fellow Cherokees, as we experience the joy of celebrating what it means to be Cherokee and as we undertake the work of building this Nation strong and making this a great Cherokee century, let us reflect on what our ancestors faced 185 years ago.

After removal, in conditions much harsher than any of us have ever known, in times more uncertain than any of us have every faced, our ancestors found the will and the courage to stand back up.

In the midst of all of that, when they might have given up, when they might have given in, they were filled with a sense of urgency to lift each other up. They were filled with a sense of urgency to build their nation up.

In our time, with all the blessings we have, with all the progress we have made, with all the strength we have built up, with the wind at our back let us feel that same sense of urgency, let us feel that same unity of purpose and let us move boldly into the year ahead.