



## On Indian Removal

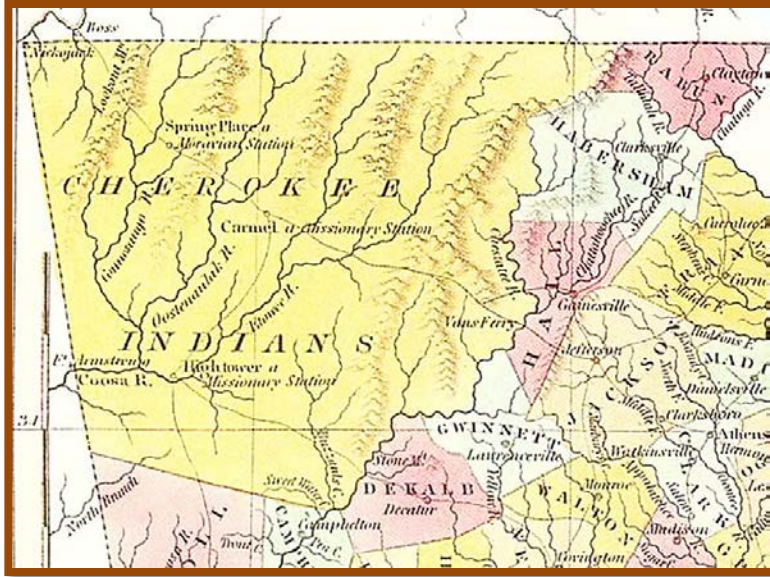
One of those stains, almost always treated lightly by history books, concerned two acts of Congress. One was called *On Indian Removal*, passed in 1830. The other was labeled *A Permanent Habitation* for the American Indians, passed in 1835. Together, they provided political justification for the removal of the Cherokee people from the Southeast, along with the Muscogee, Seminole, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Ponca, and Ho-Chunk/Winnebago nations, as well as many black farmers, both slave and free.

*Representatives of the Five Civilized Tribes: (clockwise from upper left) Sequoyah, Pushmataha, Selecta, Osceola, and a typical Chickasaw (Public Domain)*



Some of the political motivation of the two horrible, illegal, and immoral bills was to be found in the fact that the fledgling United States, flush with power after more than two centuries of protracted, slogging victories against the French, Indians, Spanish, and English, craved land in which to expand. The rest of it came from the fact that gold was discovered on land granted, supposedly in perpetuity, to the Cherokee in Georgia.

A few Congressmen, such as the honorable Davy Crockett of Tennessee, lost their political futures by opposing the *Removal Act*, but were too few in number and influence to stem the tide of greed, power, and avarice that flowed like a mighty river out from the nation's capital in Washington, DC, eventually culminating in what came to be called *Manifest Destiny*; the belief that white, European, Christian culture was ordained by God to expand from sea to shining sea, eventually spreading all the way to Hawaii.



Cherokee lands in 1830. Anthony Finley Co. of Philadelphia (Public Domain)

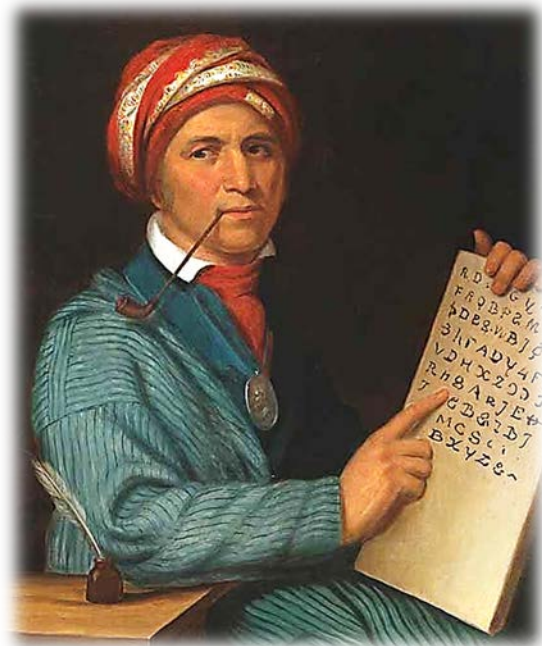
### The Need for Land

The various Indian nations are many and varied, and the forced removal of the Cherokee has come to be known as the 1,200-mile *Trail of Tears* that led, by various routes, from the Southeast, across the Mississippi River, to Oklahoma.

Descendants of the Cherokee people are now found all over America, but their ancestors once formed a prosperous nation spread out over what is now North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee. More than 240,000 of them now live in Oklahoma. The story of how these people, known for their rich tradition, spirituality, language, mythology, art, and even food, wound up there is a hard one to hear, but necessary for all who seek to learn from history rather than simply repeat it.

Following the war of 1812, the United States grew rapidly, and felt the need for land in which to expand. 17 new states were added during the half century or so between 1800 and 1860.

Sequoyah, creator of the Cherokee syllabary by Henry Inman (circa 1830) (Public Domain)



Indian tribes were considered an obstacle to growth. Most of them did not want to assimilate into European culture, although many Cherokees tried. When told they had to adopt the Christian religion, some of them did. When told they had to learn how to read and write, many excelled at it, producing legal documents and a translation of the Christian Bible. When told they had to settle down and farm, many of them tried. Some built fine, solid houses. A few even owned slaves to work their land.



*Cherokee Major Ridge developed a plantation, owned 30 African-American slaves as laborers, and became a wealthy planter (Public Domain)*

But fine houses and cleared lands tempted white settlers. Why begin from scratch when the Indians had already made such a

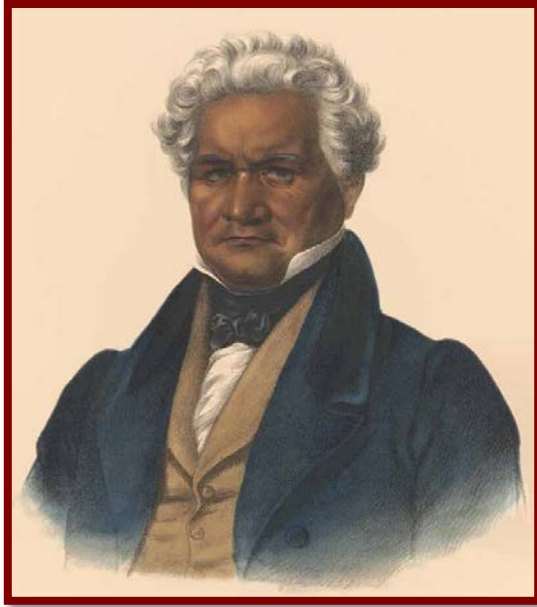
good start? Speculators who purchased such properties could immediately turn a profit. The fields had already been cleared, pastures fenced, barns and houses built.

Southeast tribes, including the Cherokees, began to negotiate with federal representatives in order to obtain protection, or at least some compensation, for their members' investments. But the government in Washington, staffed by a few greedy politicians who wanted to speculate in land, drafted policies that pressured, usually through veiled threats and bribery, some native nations into signing land agreements, almost always under false pretenses.



*Engraving of President Andrew Jackson by A. H. Ritchie after painting by D. M. Carter (c. 1860) (Public Domain)*

These agreements stated that if a tribe sold part of their land, they would be able to keep the rest, but it almost never worked out that way. After the presidential election of 1829, in which Andrew Jackson, the hero of the battle for New Orleans, was elected after he promised to remove Native Americans in favor of white settlers, the handwriting was on the wall. Indians were promised good land on the other side of the Mississippi, where they would be "*forever free from the influence of white culture*" and able to live their lives the way they wanted, "*without interference.*" A few actually moved west.



*Major Ridge (Pathkiller II) (Public Domain) and his son John Ridge (Public Domain) by J. T. Bowen's after Henry Inman, published in History of the Indian Tribes of North America (1938)*

### Treaty of New Echota

A small group of Cherokee leaders reluctantly decided that removal was inevitable, and negotiated with the government for the best possible treaty. In 1835, a committee led by Major Ridge, his son John, and nephew Elias Boudinot, negotiated the *Treaty of New Echota* on behalf of all Cherokee people. Their lawsuits, notably the 1831 *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*, and *Worcester v. Georgia* in 1832, reached the US Supreme Court but ultimately provided no relief. In effect, they sold all Cherokee Nation land east of the Mississippi to the government for five million dollars, and promised that the Indians would leave within two years. When even the Supreme Court declared much of the new legislation illegal, Andrew Jackson, then president, said publicly, “*They made their decision. Let them enforce it!*” and did nothing. Only a small group of Cherokees agreed to the agreement, with no officials from the Cherokee Nation’s government signing it, but this became the quasi-legal basis for what was to follow.



*John Ross of the Cherokee who opposed the treaty (Public Domain)*

In retaliation for negotiating these terms, a group of dissident Cherokees, following what they considered to be tribal law, pulled the three “traitors” from their beds in the middle of the night, and executed them.

Meanwhile, with the so-called “treaty” in hand, government politicians were able to convince most Americans that what was about to happen was a victory for everybody. The Indians got free land from a “magnanimous” government which was to provide \$500,000 for transportation and compensation to native landowners. Good, so-called “upstanding,” white farmers bought cheap land, often financed by Washington politicians who operated behind closed doors. Private contractors were asked to bid on supervising the removal. Some 33 military posts and camps across North Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, and Alabama were erected. 4,000 American soldiers were provided to escort the Cherokees through rough land and river routes. A lot of money exchanged hands.



*Newspaper Engraving Illustration Titled "Gold-Mining in Georgia" (1879)  
(Public Domain)*

What was covered up, however, in the rush for cheap land, was the fact that a gold rush developed on Cherokee land in Georgia. Some 300 ounces of gold a day was dug out of the hills. Speculators, including President Andrew Jackson, heavily invested. Under this kind of pressure, the *Indian Removal Act* was a forgone conclusion.

*The majority of the Cherokee refused to cross the river  
(Piumadaquila.com / Adobe Stock)*

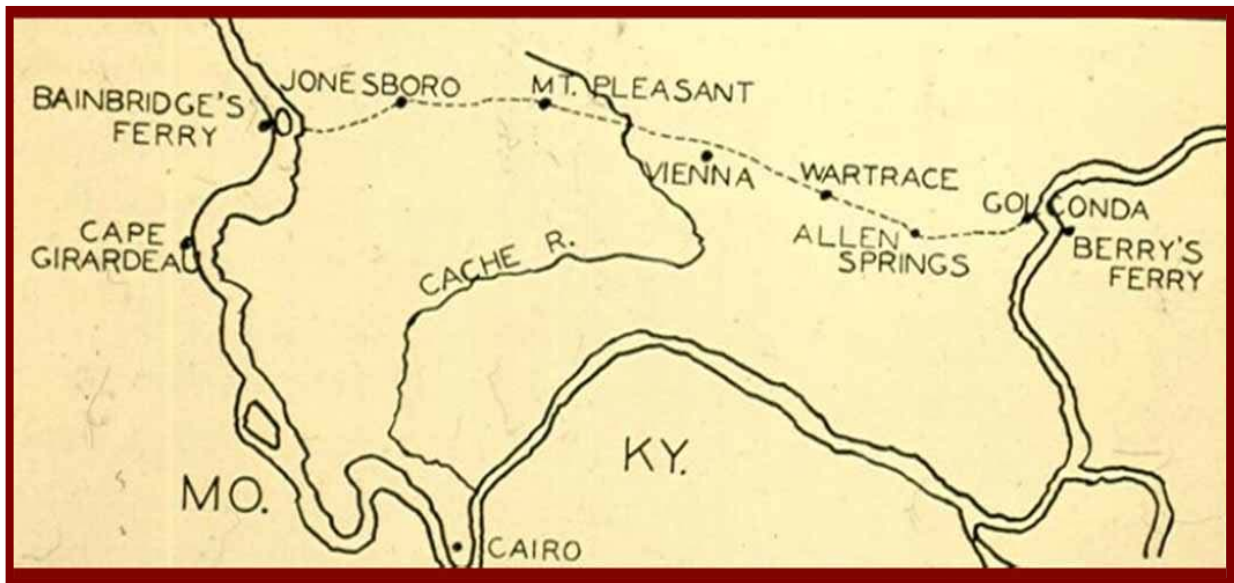


## Crossing the River

Although it was considerably cheaper to use water transport whenever possible, a religious problem soon arose. Rivers were considered, in native tradition, to be “*the long man with his head in the mountains and feet in the sea.*” They were spiritual entities, and many natives refused to board rickety boats to make the journey. This was considered ignorant superstition by white culture, and further cemented the notion that Native Americans were nothing more than backward savages. The feeling spread quickly that the sooner Indians were moved across the Mississippi, away from Christian civilization, the better.

Most of the people forced to leave their lands traveled on foot, about ten miles a day when possible. Some, including the elderly and those who were sick, rode on horseback or in wagons. The rest walked, often carrying their dead. In a journey that took several months, more than 100,000 people were herded west, and more than 15,000 died from starvation, disease, and exposure.

Private contractors, who had figured in the cost of food, soap, medicine, pay for soldiers, livestock, and all the rest, decided that food, soap, and medicine were luxuries. After billing the government for such items, they simply pocketed the money for themselves.



*A Trail of Tears map of Southern Illinois from the USDA. US Forest Service (Public Domain)*

As a final straw, when the people reached Oklahoma, much of the land that had been promised was simply taken away. And what was left immediately came under political turmoil, not from the whites, but from the Indians themselves.



Portrait of Seminole Chief Tuko-See-Mathla from *History of the Indian Tribes of North America* (Public Domain)

### Different Nations and Internal Strife

It is a mistake to talk about “Indian Culture” or “Native American Sensibilities.” The indigenous people of North America were not a monolithic, unified culture. They did not consider themselves to be “Indians,” with a common core at the center of their civilization. They were Cherokees, but they were also Muscogee, Seminole, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Ponca, and Ho-Chunk/Winnebago. These were all separate nations, who quite often in their past did not get along with each other any better

than the North and South were to feel toward one another in the near future. Sometimes they fought, sometimes they traded in peace, sometimes they just ignored one another.

To take people, any people, with different religions, mythologies, traditions, and histories, move them to a confined, foreign location, and expect them to suddenly morph into a unified whole, was simply stupid. Politicians and federal agents understood this. They just did not care. When entirely expected disagreements broke out, often with violence, these arguments were used to justify to the people east of the Mississippi that Indians were uncivilized and unappreciative.

*Selocta Chinnabby Sheloctas a Muscogee chief by James Bird King*  
(Public Domain)

“They cannot even get along with themselves,” it was said so it was good that the mighty Mississippi lay between Indians and “civilized” white people, who could live together in peace and prosperity. In 20 years, this nonsense was repudiated by blood spilled at places such as Gettysburg, Vicksburg, Shiloh, and Frederiksberg, but by then it was conveniently forgotten.







*Elizabeth "Betsy" Brown Stephens (1903), a Cherokee Indian who walked the Trail of Tears in 1838  
(Public Domain)*

Aside from the Native American cultural differences, there were problems common to any people, anywhere. The displaced tribes arrived in waves. Those who had left voluntarily years earlier had already set up rudimentary governments. They naturally resented newcomers showing up, expecting to take over. Disputes inevitably arose. This is a problem in any mass relocation, even to this day.

Those who died on the trail were mostly the elderly and very young. Without them, those forced to settle in Oklahoma were robbed of their past and their future. All the caring, misguided social workers, well-meaning missionaries, dedicated medical workers, and contributors from other walks of life, could not stop the ensuing mayhem.

The wonder of it all is that through dark, dark times, through death and destruction, through heartbreaking poverty and debilitating disease, through civil wars, Jim Crow laws, mind-numbing hopelessness, and everything else that came their way, both at the time and into their future, somehow a few managed to survive. Some 240,000 of their Cherokee descendants, to say nothing of the other displaced tribes, now live in Oklahoma, and many of them are still fighting for their rights.



*Cherokee museum - trail of tears mural (nick chapman/ CC BY NC 2.0)*

## Reduced to Statistics

It is easy to read history and think in terms of numbers. Even caring, compassionate, concerned people do it:

- “50,000 men died at Gettysburg.”
- “58,000 Americans died in Vietnam.”
- “15,000 Native Americans died during the Trail of Tears forced location.”

It may be only apocryphal, but it is said that back in the days when Joseph Stalin was Commissar of Munitions in Russia, a meeting was held of the highest-ranking Commissars to discuss a famine which was then devastating the Ukraine. One official delivered a speech about this tragedy, wherein millions of people were dying of hunger. He began to quote the horrifying figures. The story is that Stalin interrupted him to say: “If one man dies of hunger, that is a tragedy. If millions die, that is only statistics.”

The danger of studying the Trail of Tears is to think in terms of statistics, not tragedy. Try to imagine what it must have been like for people, who just wanted some peace and quiet, to wake up on a fine morning only to discover armed soldiers outside the front door, bursting into the kitchen during breakfast, and announcing that a poor family had only a few minutes to gather what they could carry before being herded out into what were, in effect, concentration camps. The people did not really have a good idea what was happening. They heard only vague rumors about what was happening in far-off Washington DC and the world outside their small homestead. Think about the confusion and anxiety, the panic and physical pain. What was it like to arrive at a camp of relatives, distant neighbors, and strangers, with gossip and opinion counter-balanced by outright terror.



*Fort Marr Blockhouse in Benton, Tennessee, is the last surviving remnant of the forts used to intern the Cherokee in preparation for their removal to Indian Territory. (Public Domain)*

Some of the people, who were young, strong, and desperate, managed to escape into the hills and mountains of Appalachia. Their descendants live there to this day. But most were forced to get up every morning, not understanding what was happening, and go through the motions of a typical day, not knowing what lay down the road. Sufficient unto each day was the evil thereof. Those lives were not statistics. They were tragedies. Now, almost 200 years later, their ghosts remain.



*Detail of memorial at New Echota (CCO)*

## Trail of Tears Historical Trail

In 1987, the Congress of the United States of America designated the Trail of Tears as a National Historic

Trail. It was dedicated to the memory of those who had suffered and died during removal. In 2009, the trail was more than doubled in size, in order to reflect research conducted into newly documented routes, confinement sites, and dispersion points.

There was a fair amount of public hoopla and sympathetic moments of silence. But for those who endured that great stain on American history, it was a matter of too little, too late. At every stop along the way, the sense of history is palpable. It is dark, ghostly, and very, very sad, but if one can be still, projecting oneself back in time, there are still voices to be heard. "Don't forget us," they seem to say. Hopefully, people of compassion and empathy never will.

*Top Image: Cherokee Woman (Sunshower Shots/ Adobe Stock)*