

THE TRAIL OF TEARS: CHEROKEE NATION (1836 – 1839)

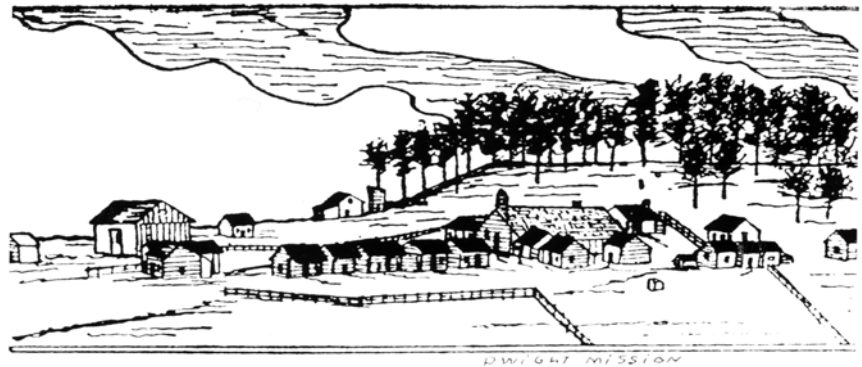
The Cherokee ancestral homelands were located in Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee. As early as the 1720s, colonial governments wanted to obtain their land for settlement. Through numerous treaties, the Cherokee ceded millions of acres of ancestral lands to the colonial and U.S. governments, which forced many to move west to Arkansas, where they were given land. In the late 18th and early 19th century, many Cherokee moved to Arkansas and settled near the St. Francis River in order to avoid white settlers. These people were known as “Old Settler” Cherokee. However, after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, whites began to settle in Arkansas and pushed the Cherokee and other traditional tribes of the area (Osage, Quapaw, and Caddo) into western Arkansas. By the 1830s, the Cherokee were facing full-scale removal through the state.

Treaty of New Echota

The legislative edict that moved the Cherokee through Arkansas to the Indian Territory was the Treaty of New Echota (1835).

Pro-removal Cherokee led by Major Ridge, his son (John) and nephew (Elias Boudinot) illegally negotiated a treaty that gave all Cherokee lands in Georgia to the U.S. in exchange for land in Indian Territory. Cherokees against removal were led by Chief John Ross and his Nationalist Party.

Despite Ross’s protests, the treaty of New Echota was ratified by the U.S. Congress in 1835 and went into law in 1836. The Cherokees were given two years to leave their homes in Georgia.



Cherokee School at Dwight Mission (near present-day Dardanelle in Yell County), ca. 1820s. Courtesy of the Arkansas History Commission.

The Cherokees Through Arkansas:

Seventeen detachments of migrating Cherokee left Georgia and Tennessee between June and December 1838. Prior to this, a number of Cherokee detachments voluntarily emigrated. The groups of Cherokee traveled through the state by steamboat, in wagons, on horseback, and by foot.

All Cherokees and all members of other tribes forced to give up their original homeland in the southeast passed through Arkansas on their way to the Indian Territory.

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Cherokee Chief John Ross.
McKenney-Hall lithograph of 1837
 after an undated painting by
Charles Bird King, Washington,
D.C. Courtesy of the Archives and
Manuscripts Division of the
Oklahoma Historical Society.



The Treaty of New Echota which ceded the last remaining Cherokee territory east of the Mississippi was signed on December 29, 1835. It was ratified by the U.S. Senate on May 23, 1836, and the Cherokees were given two years to voluntarily remove. When the time expired in May 1838, only 2,000 Cherokees had emigrated. As a result, 7,000 federal and state troops were sent to the Cherokee Nation to carry out the removal of the more than 15,000 Cherokees who remained.

Of the 17 detachments that traveled during the forced removal, four traveled most of the distance by water and 13 traveled only overland. The water route came down the Tennessee, the Ohio, the Mississippi Rivers and up the Arkansas River. Two detachments were stranded by low water near Lewisburg (Morrilton) and traveled overland the remainder of the journey to the Indian Territory. They traveled on much the same road as the Bell detachment. The Bell detachment took the most direct route across the military road through Clarendon and Little Rock before reaching Lewisburg. They continued on a road leading toward Fort Gibson until they reached a point just north of Van Buren, Arkansas. There, the detachment turned north and went up the mountain fork of Lee's Creek. The Bell detachment

Facts and Figures of Removal

Although the numbers of removal for the Cherokee Nation will be debated, scholars have tried to put the math together for the years 1835 to 1839 based on census, military enrollments and other primary source materials.

The first phase of removal included voluntary emigrations by Cherokees accepting the Treaty of New Echota (1,500 to 2,000) in 1835.

The second phase in 1838 rounded up remaining Cherokees and sent them to Indian Territory (approximately 3,000).

The last phase included the transfer of remaining Cherokees to Indian Territory in the winter of 1838 and 1839 (13 detachments of 11,000 to 13,000 persons).

The final Cherokee removal total is thought to be near 16,000 persons removed, 201 intermarriages with whites and 1,592 Negro slaves. At least 1,990 stayed behind and managed to avoid removal.

Uncertainty in these numbers is due to 1) not all Cherokees were recorded by the U.S. government, 2) many records do not exist to reveal correct numbers, 3) mixed-bloods and intermarriages allowed some Cherokees to retain U.S. citizenship and remain in their home lands of the southeast and 4) a small faction of Creeks who were living with the Cherokee were counted as tribal members (thereby skewing the numbers).

disbanded at Vineyard Post Office near present-day Evansville, Arkansas. One group disbanded at the head of Lee's Creek, the other at Mrs. Webber's just south of present-day Stillwell, Oklahoma.

Eleven detachments passed through the northwest corner of Arkansas. They entered the state near Sugar Creek on the present-day site of the Pea Ridge battlefield. They continued on the Arkansas Road skirting the present-day communities of Rogers and Springdale, and entered Fayetteville. From Fayetteville, they traveled west to Indian Territory.

The fourth detachment, led by John Benge, entered Arkansas from Missouri at the Current River in Randolph County. They passed through Fourche Dumas and Smithville, with a portion of the detachment going as far south as Batesville. They crossed the White River at Talbert's Ferry (near present-day Cotter) and continued west through Fayetteville and into the Indian Territory.

Noted detachments in Arkansas included the Drew detachment, which crossed the state in early 1839. Among the those in this group included Cherokee Chief John Ross and his family. Harsh winter conditions on this trip resulted in the spread of sickness through the detachment. Ross's wife, Quatie, suffered from a cold after giving her blanket to a child. She died near Little Rock and is memorialized at Mount Holly Cemetery. Her burial site is unknown.



Road used for removal through Izard County, Arkansas (Spring 2000). Courtesy of the Department of Arkansas Heritage.

By December of 1838, President Martin Van Buren declared Cherokee removal a success. Upon their arrival in Indian Territory, the Cherokee settled in and around Tahlequah, Oklahoma. Today, Cherokee tribal members elect a principal chief, the highest position held within the tribe and have a tripartite government. The Cherokee Nation is the second largest American Indian tribe in the U.S. with over 170,000 tribal members. It has a 14 county jurisdictional service area in northeastern Oklahoma and serves as leaders in education, housing, vocational training and economic development.

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