



Images cannot convey the realities of the Cherokee experience. In paintings like this, *Left in the Care of the Grandmothers*, however, artists try to show the desolation of the journey.

The Trail Where They Cried

In the 1830s, thousands of Cherokees were forcibly removed from their homeland in the Appalachian Mountains. They had tried valiantly to hold on to their land, but their efforts were in vain. Like other eastern Indians, they were driven west on the Trail of Tears.

In 1890, John G. Burnett, a former soldier, wrote a story to his family on the occasion of his 80th birthday. He wanted to tell them about his experiences with the Cherokees. “The removal of the Cherokee Indians . . . in the year of 1838,” he recalled, took place when he was “a young man in the prime of life.”

Burnett had grown up in eastern Tennessee, on the edge of Cherokee Territory. As a young man, he had roamed the hills and valleys of the Appalachians. He had fished for trout and hunted for deer and wild boar. He had also gotten to know many Cherokees. He spent time “hunting with them by day and sleeping around their campfires by night,” he wrote. “I learned to speak their language, and they taught me the arts of trailing and building traps and snares.” Through his experiences, Burnett learned to respect the Cherokees’ way of life.

When the removal began, Burnett was a private in the U.S. Army. Because he spoke Cherokee, he was brought in as an interpreter. In that role, he witnessed what he called “the most brutal order in the history of American Warfare.” He recalled,

I saw the helpless Cherokees arrested and dragged from their homes, and driven at the bayonet point into the stockades [fenced-in enclosures]. And in the chill of a drizzling rain on an October morning I saw them loaded like cattle or sheep into six hundred and forty-five wagons and started toward the west . . .

On the morning of November the 17th we encountered a terrific sleet and snow storm with freezing temperatures and from that day until we reached the end of the fateful journey on March the 26th, 1839, the sufferings of the Cherokees were awful. The trail of the exiles was a trail of death.

Burnett called the Cherokee removal a form of murder. Why was this tragedy inflicted on the Cherokees?

The Cherokee Nation

For centuries, the Cherokees had lived in the southern Appalachians. This was their ancient home and the center of their world. Like other southeastern Indians, they had lost land to white settlers during the colonial period. By the end of the American Revolution, their homeland was much reduced in size. But they were determined to hold on to it.

Unlike some American Indians who continued to fight white settlement, the Cherokees tried to work with the U.S. government to keep their land. They accepted the terms of treaties that limited their territory. They also agreed to the government’s efforts to “civilize” them. They took up farming as their main activity. They dressed in European clothing. They went to school and learned to read and write. They even created a republican form of government with a written constitution. They embraced the values of American democracy. They were, in the eyes of many Americans, a “model” Indian people.

The Cherokees were not willing to do everything the government wanted, though. They were not willing to sell their land and blend in with other Americans. They wanted to maintain their own identity as a separate Cherokee nation. This meant they were still an obstacle to white settlement and expansion in the South.

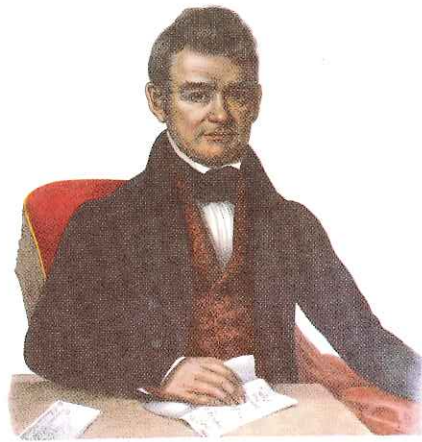
The state of Georgia, in particular, found the Cherokee position unacceptable. Georgia settlers felt they had a right to Cherokee land, and they had strong supporters to back up their claim. One of these supporters was Andrew Jackson.

The Cherokees had been faithful allies of the United States during the War of 1812. They had even fought under Jackson’s command against other Indians. But Jackson did not believe that Indians could live alongside white Americans. He wanted them moved out of the way, to lands in the West.

As president, Jackson allowed Georgia to put pressure on the Indians. This pressure increased after gold was discovered on Cherokee land in 1829. The following year, Congress passed the Indian Removal Act with Jackson’s support. But the president still could not force the Cherokees to move. Their land rights were based on a treaty with the government. They would have to sign another treaty giving up their land.

To the Cherokees, their homeland was the spiritual as well as the geographical center of their world. The thought of abandoning it was devastating.





Cherokee chief John Ross led his people for more than 30 years. After losing the battle to preserve their homelands, Ross helped the Cherokees move west.

The Removal

The Cherokee government, under Chief John Ross, had worked hard to prevent removal. It had appealed to the American people to win sympathy for its cause. It had also taken its case to court, asking the justice system to support the Cherokees' right to their land.

But not all Cherokees supported these efforts. A number of Cherokee leaders believed that removal was inevitable. In 1835, these men signed the Treaty of New Echota, agreeing to give up the land and move west to Indian Territory. Chief Ross and the majority of Cherokees were outraged. They called the treaty illegal and asked Congress to cancel it. But their appeals failed. Everyone would have to go, they were told.

Some Cherokees—mainly those who supported the treaty—left voluntarily. But most waited until the deadline of May 1838. At that point, an army of 7,000 U.S. soldiers surrounded Cherokee Territory. They forced the Cherokees out of their homes and into temporary camps or stockades. “The soldiers came and took us from home,” one Cherokee woman recalled. “They drove us out of doors and did not permit us to take anything with us, not even a . . . change of clothes.”

Many Cherokees were held in the camps for months. Conditions were harsh. One missionary reported that the Indians “were obliged at night to lie down on the naked ground, in the open air, exposed to wind and rain, and herd[ed] together . . . like droves of hogs.” Some Cherokees escaped and fled into the mountains, only to be captured by soldiers and returned to the camps.

The march west began in the summer of 1838. It took place in several phases and along several routes. The first parties set out in June, traveling by land and river. But summer heat and drought conditions caused great suffering. The government decided to postpone further actions until fall.

American Indian artist Brummet Echohawk depicted the hardships of the removal in his painting *Trail of Tears*. As the soldier moves the marchers along, one who did not survive is buried by the roadside.



In October, the removals began again. The 850-mile journey west took several months. Although some Cherokees traveled in wagons or on horseback, most went on foot. One witness wrote, “Even aged females, apparently nearly ready to drop into the grave, were traveling with heavy burdens attached to the back—on the sometimes frozen ground . . . with no covering for the feet except what nature had given them.” As winter took hold, conditions worsened. One wagon driver reported,

There is the coldest weather in Illinois I ever experienced anywhere. The streams are all frozen over something like eight or twelve inches thick. We are compelled to cut through the ice to get water for ourselves and [the] animals.

—Martin Davis, in a letter of December 1838

Several parties were held up by winter weather, unable to go forward for weeks on end. They suffered from exposure, disease, and starvation. These conditions were especially hard on children and the elderly. One woman recalled that “there was much sickness and a great many little children died of whooping cough.” Many Cherokees were buried along the trail.

Finally, in the spring of 1839, the last of the groups arrived in Indian Territory. By that time, some 4,000 Cherokees—around a fourth of all those removed—had died. The survivors would call this journey Nu-No-Du-Na-Tlo-Hi-Lu, or “The Trail Where They Cried.”

The Aftermath

At first, life in Indian Territory was hard. The Cherokees had no homes and few possessions. In addition, many of the later arrivals had bitter feelings toward the treaty supporters who had moved west before them. They considered these people traitors. Violence sometimes flared between the newer and older groups of settlers.

Gradually, however, the Cherokee people got back on their feet. They formed a new government and set up farms and businesses. They also established a good public school system. John Ross continued to lead the Cherokees until his death in 1866.

Today, the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma has around 240,000 citizens. Smaller, separate bands of Cherokees live in Oklahoma and North Carolina. Many other Americans also have Cherokee ancestry. For all Cherokees, the Trail of Tears represents a great tragedy in their history. But they also take pride in what they have achieved. As Chad Smith, the current leader of the Cherokee Nation, put it, “We are not a people of the past. We are a people of the present, and for many centuries, we will be a people of the future.”

The Cherokee heritage is preserved in the lives of modern Cherokee people, as well as in museums. In this Alabama museum, on the site of ancient burial mounds, a Cherokee guide (right) explains traditional uses of furs to visitors.



READING FURTHER

Preparing to Write: Understanding Chronology

From early colonial times on, newcomers believed they had the right to claim land wherever American Indians lived. Europeans had been in conflict with the Cherokees since the 1600s, when English colonists came to Virginia. For more than 50 years after the American Revolution, the Cherokee Nation struggled with the more powerful nation in which it existed—the United States.

Place these six sentences about the conflict in chronological order by numbering them from 1 to 6.

- ___ Congress passed the Indian Removal Act.
- ___ The Cherokees were allies of the United States in the War of 1812.
- ___ Some Cherokee leaders signed the Treaty of New Echota.
- ___ The Cherokees occupied a reduced homeland after the American Revolution.
- ___ The Cherokees were forced to leave their homeland and go to Indian Territory.
- ___ Gold was discovered on Cherokee land.

In the conflict between the Cherokees and the United States, what did the Cherokees want to achieve?

What did the U.S. government want to achieve?

Writing a Letter to the Editor

Some Americans were angered by Andrew Jackson's policy of forced removal of American Indians from their lands. Take the position of one such American in 1839. Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper, protesting the removal of the Cherokees. In your letter, do the following:

- Describe the physical and emotional hardships the Cherokees faced during the removal. Include an eyewitness report.
- Include arguments designed to persuade the president to change his policy.

Use this rubric to evaluate your letter. Make changes in your letter if you need to.

Score	Description
3	The letter has convincing descriptions and arguments. It is well constructed with correct letter format. There are no spelling or grammar errors.
2	The letter has descriptions and arguments. It is constructed with correct letter format. There are some spelling or grammar errors.
1	The letter does not have descriptions or arguments. It is not constructed with correct letter format. There are many spelling or grammar errors.