

What was it like to be a young Cherokee Indian in the 1800s? In 1838, if you were Cherokee, you and about 15,000 of your people would have been forced off the land where your ancestors had lived for thousands of years. What caused this tragedy? What was life like struggling to survive the 1,000-mile march to the unknown territory in the West?

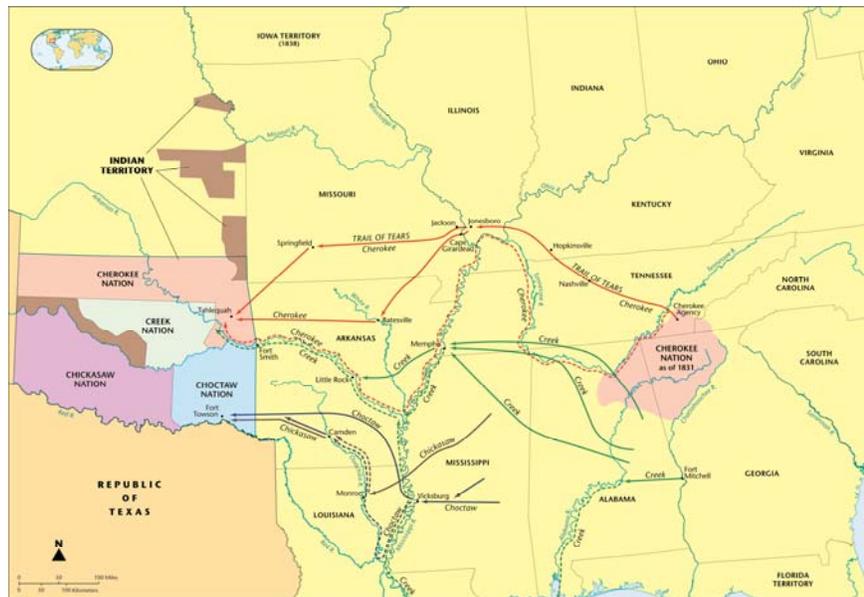
The Tragedy of the Cherokee People

Starting in the early 1800s, the U.S. government began to systematically relocate Native Americans from their ancestral lands in the southeastern United States. The government sent the Native Americans to territories west of the Mississippi River in order to open the lands to white settlers. Some tribes signed treaties giving up their land, but others refused to leave their long-established homes.

What did the U.S. government do to the Native American tribes who rejected the treaties and would not give up their land? President Andrew Jackson came up with a solution. Jackson believed the Indians

had no right to their ancestral lands. Jackson pushed through the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which allowed the government to force the Native Americans off their land. Many tribes fought back, but they could not prevent the removal. Between 1816 and 1850, more than 100,000 Native Americans were ejected from their homes and sent to “Indian Territory” in Oklahoma and Arkansas. These displaced tribes included the Cherokee, the Choctaw, the Chickasaw, and the Creek.

The Cherokee had lived in the southeastern United States for centuries, and they were the most famous victims of the Indian Removal Act of 1830. Members of the Cherokee tribes were ripped from their homes, kept in detention camps, and marched across the wilderness. Along the way, about a quarter of the Cherokee who had been forced to leave Cherokee territory died. This route, now referred to



Throughout the early 1800s, Indian nations were forced to give up their lands and relocate.

as the Trail of Tears, serves as a reminder of one of the cruelest government actions in American history.

Life Along the Trail of Tears

Gold was discovered in Georgia in 1829. This discovery caused a gold rush. White settlers moved into the area hoping to strike it rich. The promise of prosperity also led the state government to begin making plans to seize Cherokee land. While the Supreme Court ruled that Georgia was not able to claim Cherokee land, the State of Georgia, the United States Congress, and President Andrew Jackson ignored that ruling. Congress passed the Indian Removal Act in 1830 and in 1838, federal troops came on to Native America lands and rounded up the Cherokee. The soldiers stormed into homes and forced out many Cherokee at gunpoint. The Cherokee did not even have time to pack their things. Instead, they were forced to leave with only the clothes on their backs. After they were forced from their homes, some Cherokee witnessed white people looting their homes, stealing all their possessions.

The Cherokee were forced to go to an internment camp in Tennessee. There, tribe members waited to be “removed” to Oklahoma. Life in the internment camp was terrible. There was not enough food or water. They were crowded together in an area too small for them. The lack of clean water made some people desperate. They drank stagnant water and died from diseases carried in the water. There was not adequate sanitation, either. Both the stagnant water and the poor sanitation proved to be a breeding ground for disease. More Cherokee died.

Another Cherokee group forced from their homes had taken what was called the water route. They were supposed to travel by boat along a river route to Oklahoma. But the rivers were too low. Because travel by water proved impossible, the Cherokee were forced out of their boats and along a land route. The summer of 1838 was incredibly hot and dry. This alone would have made the travel difficult, but the journey was made more difficult because of a lack of drinking water. Due to the lack of water and the rapid spread of diseases aboard boats, between three and five people died every day. The news of these losses reached the Cherokee in the internment camp in Tennessee. It made their lives even more miserable.

At last, in the fall, after five long and terrible months, the Cherokee left the camp in Tennessee. The 12 groups of Cherokee, which included about 1,000 Cherokee each, began their 800-mile march to the West. In total, over 15,000 Cherokee, most from Georgia, were forcibly relocated. They set out on foot and in wagons. The heat and drought of the summer were over, but they were replaced by heavy, cold rain. The roads turned to mud. The wagons could hardly move forward. Some of the wagons had to be abandoned. The Cherokee trudged on.

In January, they reached the Ohio River. However, winter had come early. The river was covered in ice and impassable. The Cherokee were trapped. With nowhere to go, and with food and water scarce, more Cherokee died. Some died of disease. Others starved to death.

Many Cherokee lost family members. Some even lost their entire families. Death could strike at any time. In an 1838 diary entry, Reverend Daniel S. Butrick, a missionary who worked and lived with the Cherokee in the 1830s, wrote:

During the night a Cherokee woman died in the camps. Though she had given birth to a child but a few days before, yet last evening she was up and no danger was apprehended, but in the morning she was found dead with the infant in her arms.

At last, in March 1839, the Cherokee who had set out from the camp in Tennessee reached Oklahoma. The journey had been especially hard on the most vulnerable Cherokee: the very young and the very old. No one knew for sure how many people died. Estimates are that about 4,000 Cherokee—almost one-third of the Cherokee removed from Georgia—died during the Trail of Tears.

Afterword

The Trail of Tears is now a national historic trail. It winds through nine states, including Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Tennessee. It is a living reminder of a terrible time in American history. It recalls the suffering of the Cherokee. It is also a reminder of the excesses and cruelty of the government and its policies toward Native Americans in the 1800s. It is difficult to understand the motivations behind Indian Removal policies. Yet studying history makes people aware of the dangers of such policies, hopefully preventing similar events from occurring in the future.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1. What was the purpose of the Indian Removal Act of 1830?**
 - A. It allowed the U.S. government to seize lands belonging to Native American tribes.
 - B. It allowed Native American tribes to remain on their lands.
 - C. It forced white settlers off Native American lands.
 - D. It divided all Native American lands into reservations for the tribes.

- 2. Approximately how many Cherokee died along the Trail of Tears?**
 - A. 1,000
 - B. 2,000
 - C. 3,000
 - D. 4,000

- 3. When did the Cherokee finally reach Oklahoma?**
 - A. December 1838
 - B. January 1839
 - C. March 1839
 - D. March 1840

- 4. The reading passage notes that the Trail of Tears is a reminder of one of the cruelest government actions in U.S. history. What details from the passage support this conclusion?**