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Z Period

The Trail of Cherokee Tears

The removal of approximately 100,000 Native Americans from their homelands at the close of the 1830s marks an extraordinary change in Native American history. The Trail of Tears specifically refers to the 16,000 Cherokee Indians who were forced to leave their homes, even after assimilation with American culture in Georgia. The Trail brutally relocated the Cherokee into the West against their will and accounts for the deaths of 4,000 Cherokee people. John G. Burnett served as an interpreter in an army group that oversaw removal and wrote a letter about the brutality of the Trail to his children in 1890. He remembers, saying "Murder is murder, and somebody must answer. Somebody must explain the streams of blood that flowed in the Indian country in the summer of 1838. Somebody must explain the 4000 silent graves that mark the trail of the Cherokees to their exile."¹ The 2,200 miles that the Cherokee Indians had to walk affected their society much more than a simple geographical change. After the Trail of Tears, the Cherokee lifestyle underwent general changes in the government, education, and culture as compared with before removal.

The Cherokee government prior to the Trail of Tears generally followed a traditional Native American system with influences from the United States' government system. In Georgia, the Cherokee Nation was built on a structure of seven clans ruled by chiefs that made decisions over political and social matters. This traditional form of government contrasted the surrounding

¹ Burnett, John G. "Story of the Removal of the Cherokees." In *Civil Rights in America*. American Journey. Woodbridge, CT: Primary Source Media, 1999. U.S. History in Context http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/EJ2163000168/UHIC?u=va_p_collegiate&sid=UHIC&xid=8e1fe56a. Accessed January 14, 2019.

American government, which later caused the assimilation of the Cherokee government. Thomas Jefferson preached a “Civilization Policy” for the Cherokee to follow, urging the Cherokee people to integrate into American lifestyle in order to maintain peaceful connections between the two. With Jeffersonsonian influences, Chief John Ross of the Cherokee reformed the Cherokee government into one similar to the United States's. He encouraged the Cherokee to adopt a written system of laws, a bicameral legislative body, and a government with legislative, judicial, and executive branches. Ross modeled a republican constitution after the U. S. Constitution and implemented the new constitution into the Cherokee government system in 1827. The constitution included a jury and a written criminal code, a trademark of the American system.² By the start of the Trail of Tears, the Cherokee government was grounded in Cherokee traditions with heavy influences from the United States.

The Cherokee government also acted in compliance with the United States government. Both existed together peacefully and communicated over matters which involved the two. In the Battle of Horseshoe Bend against the Creeks, the Cherokee Chief Junaluska fought alongside Jackson, and thirty-three of his people died in combat. Chief Junaluska even “drove his tomahawk through the skull of a Creek warrior, when the Creek had Jackson at his mercy.”³ This benign relationship continued, and a United States’ government order from the Cherokee Agency explains that the United States’ government started the removal with the intentions to “preserve acts of kindness and humanity”⁴ and maintain proper relations with the Cherokee. However, the

² "Ross, John." In *West's Encyclopedia of American Law*, 2nd ed., edited by Shirelle Phelps and Jeffrey Lehman, 405-407. Vol. 8. Detroit, MI: Gale, 2005. *U.S. History in Context* http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/CX3437703858/UHIC?u=va_p_collegiate&sid=UHIC&xid=013e6473. Accessed February 17, 2019.

³ Burnett, John G. "Story of the Removal of the Cherokees." In *Civil Rights in America. American Journey*. Woodbridge, CT: Primary Source Media, 1999. *U.S. History in Context* http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/EJ2163000168/UHIC?u=va_p_collegiate&sid=UHIC&xid=8e1fe56a. Accessed January 14, 2019.

⁴ Cherokee Agency. Orders No. 25 Head Quarters, Eastern Division Cherokee AgencyTen. n. p. 1838. 1838. Pdf. <https://www.loc.gov/item/rbpe.1740400a/>. Accessed April 1st, 2019.

amiable relationship between the Cherokee and United States began wilt closer to the start of the Trail. When the same Chief Junaluska sought protection from the removal through President Jackson, Jackson responded "Sir, your audience is ended. There is nothing I can do for you."⁵ Following the Treaty of New Echota, legislation that called for Cherokee land to be exchanged for land in the west, John Ross responded to the U.S. government, saying,

“should [the Cherokee] be driven from their native land, they will then look in melancholy sadness upon the golden chains, presented by President Washington to the Cherokee people, as emblematical of the brightness and purity of the friendship between the United States and the Cherokee nation.”⁶

By the start of the Trail of Tears, the political relationship between the Cherokee Nation and the United States had evidently deteriorated since their benign existence in the early 1800s.

Much like the government, Cherokee education prior to the Trail of Tears showed a combination of Cherokee traditions and American influences. The Cherokee language and society was divided in three threads of towns known like Upper (Overhill), Middle, and Low. Cherokee citizens could generally communicate through all three and were also fluent in trading languages. The education system contained threads of this Cherokee culture, in how education followed religion and intense traditions. Young boys would train heavily and undergo physical tests to become the hunters and farmers. These tests were rooted in Cherokee religion and deeply connected to nature. However, this traditional form slowly began including white influences.

"Formal Education" came to the Cherokees in the early 19th century in Georgia set up by white

⁵ Burnett, John G. "Story of the Removal of the Cherokees." In *Civil Rights in America. American Journey*. Woodbridge, CT: Primary Source Media, 1999. U.S. History in Context http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/EJ2163000168/UHIC?u=va_p_collegiate&sid=UHIC&xid=8e1fe56a. Accessed January 14, 2019.

⁶ Excerpt from "Letter from John Ross, principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation of Indians," Digital Public Library of America, <https://dp.la/item/8a52ffbc512c9a89a5cece9ceed79b6>. Accessed March 31st, 2019.

missionaries to educate the young Indians.⁷ The Cherokee people surprisingly encouraged the creation of these education establishments, and Chief John Ross was even a known advocate for missionaries educating the Cherokee youth; however, Ross strongly prohibited the conversion to Christianity and allowed missionaries to stay only if they focused solely on education. The missionaries complied, and these joint efforts brought the Cherokee literacy rate up to ninety percent in only three years.⁸

Furthermore, Cherokee culture reflects a similar pattern of change like the government and education. The Cherokee society was originally based on a matrilineal, hunting and gathering system where women would grow crops at home and men would hunt to search for food.⁹ In the early years of western colonization, the mindset of Cherokee Indians remained against the economic commodity of the land; however, after 1680, as the colonies increased, the Cherokee discovered the importance of deerskin to colonists and began to take part in this new market economy. When visiting the Cherokee Nation in Georgia in 1837, geologist George Featherstonhaugh remarked on the signs of progress he had seen in the community. There was a strong presence of “Christian missionaries and churches, books printed in the native language, a tribal government based on written laws, and fields under cultivation.”¹⁰ By the time of the Trail of Tears, the Cherokee culture had become immensely civilized by American terms, yet they were still forced out by the Indian Removal Act. Featherstonhaugh laments that the Cherokee

⁷ Neely, Sharlotte. "The Quaker Era of Cherokee Indian Education, 1880-1892." *Appalachian Journal* 2, no. 4 (1975): 314-22. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40932066>. Accessed March 31st, 2019.

⁸ "Ross, John." In *West's Encyclopedia of American Law*, 2nd ed., edited by Shirelle Phelps and Jeffrey Lehman, 405-407. Vol. 8. Detroit, MI: Gale, 2005. *U.S. History in Context* http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/CX3437703858/UHIC?u=va_p_collegiate&sid=UHIC&xid=013e6473. Accessed February 17, 2019.

⁹ Golden Ink. About North Georgia. http://www.aboutnorthgeorgia.com/ang/The_Cherokee. Accessed April 3, 2019

¹⁰ Satz, Ronald N. "The Cherokee Trail of Tears: A Sesquicentennial Perspective." *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (1989): 431-66. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40582012>. Accessed January 15, 2019.

people were being forced out “not because they cannot be civilized, but because a pseudo set of civilized beings, [namely, white Georgians], who are too strong for them, want their possessions!”¹¹ In spite of the substantial assimilation the Cherokee culture underwent before, the Trail of Tears still removed the Cherokee from their ancestral homeland.

The British Proclamation of 1763 classified the region from the Appalachian Mountains to the Mississippi River as Indian territory, but land speculators and settlers were adamant in entering the region. The number of American citizens in this region drastically increased in 1829, when a gold rush occurred in Georgia on Cherokee land. At its peak, Georgia mines could produce about 300 ounces of gold a day. Many Georgian citizens as well as President Jackson wished to gain the Cherokee land and this process of Cherokee Removal began in 1831 after Andrew Jackson ignored the precedent set by the court case of Worcester vs. Georgia. The court found that the Cherokee Nation was a self-governed territory and said that the United States government needed to respect that; however, this was hardly enacted in events.

In 1835, Brigadier General John E. Wool, at army headquarters in New Echota warned the Cherokee that they have until May 25, 1838 to remove to a territory west of the Mississippi according to the provisions of the New Echota Treaty or else they will be forced to remove by US soldiers. He threatened saying, “Your fate is decided; and if you do not voluntarily get ready and go by the time fixed in the treaty, you will then be forced from this country by the soldiers of the United States.”¹² By this time, the Trail of Tears was inevitable for the Cherokee. They were unwilling to leave their ancestral home but were forced by the strength of the United States. The

¹¹ Satz, Ronald N. "The Cherokee Trail of Tears: A Sesquicentennial Perspective." *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (1989): 431-66. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40582012>. Accessed January 15, 2019.

¹² "[Address] 1837 Mar. 22, Headquarters, New Echota, G[eorgi]a / Br[i]g[adier] Gen[era]l John E. Wool," Digital Public Library of America, <https://dp.la/item/898c9b0ca06fae401f0bbf6fe0003bd3>. Accessed March 31st, 2019

United States was a vastly stronger force, and the Cherokee understood the consequences of resisting removal. On October 1st, when the first detachment left Rattlesnake Springs, a mixed blood scholar, William Shorey Coodey expressed that the hardest part of removal for the Cherokee people was leaving the home of their ancestors, saying "Pangs of parting are tearing the hearts of our bravest men at this forced abandonment of their dear lov'd country."¹³ The Trail moved the Cherokee over a total of 2,200 miles, crossing nine states and included land and water routes. The Cherokee were split into seventeen detachments, and each detachment took approximately twenty-one days to travel the dreary 2,200 miles.

On the Trail, John G. Burnett, an American soldier remembers: "I saw the helpless Cherokees arrested and dragged from their homes, and driven at the bayonet point into the stockades. 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."¹⁴ An article in the New York Observer from 1839 explains how a Cherokee mother carried her child as far as she could only to have to leave her loved baby on the ground and continue on with the removal. In an interview with the American Native Press Archives, Lilian Anderson of Eufaula, Oklahoma, reveals the horrors her great aunt had to live through on the trail. Her great-aunt, Chin Deanawash, was a widow with three children on the trail. Her youngest son could not walk, and she had him tied to her back with a shawl. Then, she carried her second child on her hip, and held her oldest son's hand. The Indians would go two or three days without water or food, and as

¹³ Hoig, Stan. "Trail of Tears." In *Encyclopedia of Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity*, edited by Dinah L. Shelton, 1043-1045. Vol. 3. Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005. *U.S. History in Context*. http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/CX3434600340/UHIC?u=va_p_collegiate&sid=UHIC&xid=f17984e2. Accessed February 17, 2019.

¹⁴ Burnett, John G. "Story of the Removal of the Cherokees." In *Civil Rights in America*. American Journey. Woodbridge, CT: Primary Source Media, 1999. *U.S. History in Context* http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/EJ2163000168/UHIC?u=va_p_collegiate&sid=UHIC&xid=8e1fe56a. Accessed January 14, 2019.

they hiked through wilderness, mothers and fathers had to cut down timber to clear the way. In these horrible conditions, Chin Deanawash lost all three of her sons, and even dug the small graves herself with a broken case knife. The cold, dysentery, whooping cough, and other diseases took no survivors and painful graves of all sizes littered the Trail.

Because of the brutality of the trail, many American citizens were furiously against this removal, specifically Christian missionaries. A missionary, David Butrick, lamented “for what crime was this whole nation doomed?”¹⁵ Lucy Ames Butler, another Christian missionary from Connecticut, strongly believed that the white man was not doing the right thing in taking away Native American land. She wrote a passionate letter to her friend, Drusilla Burnap, in 1835, angry at the injustice of white men enjoying the wealth and freedom that came from the oppression of oppressed Indians.¹⁶ Furthermore, Lucy’s husband, Elizur Butler, accompanied the Cherokee as a medic through the trail and helped create the estimate that 4,000 Cherokee died. The Cherokee were unjustly removed, yet had the support of American Christian missionaries along the way.

However, when these Christian missionaries that were against the removal followed the Cherokee to their new territory in modern-day Oklahoma, they implemented more changes than they had before. Prior to the Trail, Chief John Ross had attempted to prevent religious conversion from the missionaries, but after the Trail this prevention ended. These changes caused much more assimilation of the Cherokee than before in Georgia, and many more Cherokee were converted to Christianity in the years following the Trail of Tears. The Christian

¹⁵ Hoig, Stan. "Trail of Tears." In *Encyclopedia of Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity*, edited by Dinah L. Shelton, 1043-1045. Vol. 3. Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005. *U.S. History in Context*. http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/CX3434600340/UHIC?u=va_p_collegiate&sid=UHIC&xid=f17984e2. Accessed February 17, 2019.

¹⁶ Cherokee Relations with the US Government before Removal. National Park Service. Last modified August 29, 2017. <https://www.nps.gov/fosm/learn/historyculture/chokeee-relations-with-us-government-before-removal.htm>. Accessed April 5, 2019.

Cherokees numbered in the thousands following the Trail. The blend of Christian and Cherokee beliefs created a mixed, new culture, that values Christianity as one of the pillars. As of today, if one were to call the Cherokee nation and be put on hold the Christian anthem *Amazing Grace* plays in the Cherokee traditional language: U-ne-la-nv-hi-u-we-tsi-i-ga-gu-yv-he-i-hna-qu-tso-sv-wi-yu-lo-se-i-ga-gu-yv-ho-nv. This unique mix of cultures has created a new identity and also played a large role in uniting the Cherokee people following removal. Mary Brown, from the City University of New York, argues that post-removal, the Cherokee were a disparate people and used “their version of Christianity as a primary tool for creating a national cultural identity” in an act of union and autonomy.¹⁷ The post-removal cultural changes show an evolution, in which the Cherokee culture adapted and changed because the environment surrounding them did as well.

Much like culture evolved, the Cherokee education system also changed after removal. When creating an institutionalized education, the Cherokee educators believed that one common language was pertinent to encourage unity in such a dispersed community, and English became the preferred educational society. This change to the English language was one of the fastest ways for Native Americans to assimilate into white culture. As English became the preferred language, the U.S. government also restarted the Cherokee education system by controlling the system through an appointed superintendent. Previously, the Cherokee National Council had an education system that fundamentally instilled a nationalistic love for Cherokee nation in the teachings; however, the U.S. institutions focused instead on assimilation and building

¹⁷ Brown, Mary. "A Christian Nation: How Christianity United the People of the Cherokee Nation." Master's thesis, City University of New York. https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1371&context=cc_etds_theses. Accessed April 23rd, 2019.

nationalistic sentiments towards the United States.¹⁸ Much like the government, Christian missionaries that had come with the Cherokee wanted to evolve the Cherokee education system. The Quaker Christians worked with the United States government to create Quaker established schools in the Cherokee Nation. This connection between the Quakers and the Cherokee began only strengthened in 1877, when Quaker, J.D. Garner worked alongside Cherokee men and later became the Superintendent of Schools for all Cherokees east of the Mississippi River.¹⁹ The new education systems changed much like the Cherokee culture did: they evolved into a more assimilated and “Americanized” version than had previously existed.

Finally, the Cherokee government system underwent several changes after the Cherokee removal. The primary change rests in the Cherokees political relationship with the United States. After the Trail of Tears, Chief John Ross became an important figure in "reconstruction" and enacted much of the legislation he enacted before. In Oklahoma, he set land aside for schools, created a newspaper, and a new capital, and a lot of these education initiatives had the support of the U.S. government. However, politically, the Cherokee Nation relations with the United States remained tense. In the Civil War, the Cherokees sided with the Confederacy, and this was a large aspect of their strained relationship with the U.S.: they believed the U.S. government was untrustworthy. Although, several years after removal, in 1866, John Ross helped rejuvenate Cherokee and American ties. Ross attended the Grand Council of Indians at Fort Smith and prepared a treaty between the federal government and the Cherokee Nation. This treaty renewed all previous treaties between both government and alleviated tension. Additionally, in some

¹⁸ Smithers, Gregory D. "'This Is the Nation's Heart-String': Formal Education and the Cherokee Diaspora During the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries." *Wicazo Sa Review* 30, no. 2 (2015): 28-55. doi:10.5749/wicazosareview.30.2.0028. JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/wicazosareview.30.2.0028?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents. Accessed January 16.

¹⁹ Neely, Sharlotte. "The Quaker Era of Cherokee Indian Education, 1880-1892." *Appalachian Journal* 2, no. 4 (1975): 314-22. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40932066>. Accessed March 31st, 2019.

respects, the Cherokee Nation was split during the Trail of Tears. 1,400 Cherokees were not removed and lived in the mountains of North Carolina and Tennessee. They were able to do this because they accepted the treaty of New Echota which allowed them to become citizens of the states. This phenomenon created a group of American-Cherokees under the power of the United States.

The rightfully named Trail of Tears saw the removal of 16,000 Cherokee Indians from their ancestral territory in Georgia to modern-day Oklahoma. The geographical change caused an evolution of Cherokee culture, government, and education. Over the course of the years before and after the Trail, the Cherokee lifestyle experienced a greater assimilation to American culture. Before the Trail, all aspects of Cherokee life were slowly becoming slightly Americanized with proper regulations; however, after the Trail, they began assimilating at an even more rapid pace, creating a evolutionary contrast between the Indian society before and after the Trail. The Cherokee Nation today shows the unique, semi-assimilated blend of American and Cherokee culture that appeared at the end of the Trail. The Trail created a new Cherokee identity that still shows its legacy in Cherokee societies today. In his *The Education of Little Tree*, Asa Earl Carter says, "Grandma and Grandpa wanted me to know of the past, for "If ye don't know where your people have been then ye won't know where your people are going."²⁰ In their past, the Cherokee people have been through 2,200 miles of Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Tennessee on the Trail of Tears, and this journey not only developed an evolved Cherokee Identity, but it still leads the Cherokee Nation to where they are going today.

²⁰ KRUPAT, ARNOLD. "Representing Cherokee Dispossession." *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, Series 2, 17, no. 1 (2005): 16-41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20737242>. Accessed March 19th, 2019.

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