**RESEARCH PROJECT OF THE OKLAHOMA CHAPTER OF THE**

**TRAIL OF TEARS ASSOCIATION**

**Research at the National Archives**

**College Park, Maryland and Washington D.C.**

by

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Oklahoma Chapter of the Trail of Tears Association

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Purpose of Project…………………………………………………………………………..1

Research Trip June 20-24, 2006……………………………………………………………2

Research Trip June 25-28, 2007……………………………………………………………3

Research Trip July 7-12, 2008……………………………………………………………..4

Research Project Results…………………………………………………………………...5

Inventories for Three Research Trips……………………………………………………...7

Documents

Coffins and Grave Digging for Deceased Cherokee Children

Coffins for Deceased Cherokees

List of Cherokees Receiving Tents

Benge Detachment

George Hicks’ Detachment

Usage of Oxen

i

**PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT**

The Oklahoma Chapter of the Trail of Tears Association had its spring meeting in April

2006; and Dr. Daniel F. Littlefield, of the Sequoyah Research Center of the University of

Arkansas at Little Rock, was the speaker. Dr. Littlefield had made numerous trips to the National

Archives to research the Indian Removal of 1838-39. He spoke at the meeting of his last trip to

research at the National Archives and what he had discovered in Record Group 217 that was comprised of the records of the General Accounting Office in the United States Treasury Records 1794-1894. These records were located at National Archives II in College Park, Maryland.

Dr. Littlefield informed us of the numerous receipts, vouchers, lists, disbursements, rolls, and various other documents pertaining to the removal of the Five Civilized Tribes. Dr. Littlefield was primarily researching the Choctaw removal records; however, he told us of the volume of Cherokee removal records that were in Record Group 217. Dr. Littlefield surmised that the Cherokee removal records in this record group were rarely, if ever, used. In the handouts that he shared with the group at the meeting, Dr. Littlefield demonstrated the type of documents that the record group contained. He proceeded to challenge the Oklahoma Chapter of the Trail of Tears Association to form a research team and travel to College Park to research in these little used documents.

Several researchers at the meeting were very excited about the prospect of finding documents that would give additional facts concerning the Trail of Tears. We were eager to discover Cherokee muster rolls that had never been found, and to learn any data concerning the depots that were established in the Cherokee Nation west that provided subsistence to the Cherokee families for a year after removal in accordance with the treaty of 1835.

1

**RESEARCH TRIP JUNE 20-24, 2006**

Our research team was formed with Jack D. Baker, president of the National Trail of Tears Association; Curtis Rohr, president of the Oklahoma Chapter; Ed Henshaw, past-president of the Oklahoma Chapter; and Marybelle Chase, vice-president of the Oklahoma Chapter. The team traveled to College Park, Maryland, and was met there by Dr. Daniel F. Littlefield of the Sequoyah Research Center at Little Rock. Dr. Littlefield informed the team where we should begin in Record Group 217.

Record Group 217, Entry 525, Settled Indian Accounts, United States Treasury, consists of 4,164 legal archival boxes with numerous files in each box. The pages in each file could number anywhere from one to one hundred.

Dr. Littlefield had ordered a cart of 21 boxes for us in advance. We began with Box No. 81—year 1830. Ed Henshaw volunteered to do the photocopying of the documents that we deemed worthy to copy. Marybelle Chase monitored and kept a list of the boxes that each researcher had at a given time. This method assured us that we would not be duplicating any researcher’s work. The research team examined 216 boxes during this trip.

Each page in all the files within a box was examined to determine whether the particular document was necessary for our research project. During this trip, 1,475 copies were made and we reached the year 1839 in our research. Upon the return to Oklahoma, Marybelle Chase placed the documents in file folders according to box number and file number. Every effort was made to place the documents in chronological order. Two sets of labels were made; the first for designating a broad description of the file, and the second set that designated the box number, file number, and a description of the contents of each file. Forty-eight files were completed.

2

**RESEARCH TRIP JUNE 25-28, 2007**

The Oklahoma Chapter research team returned to the National Archives II, College Park, Maryland, to research in Record Group 217. The team consisted of Jack D. Baker, Curtis Rohr, Ed and Gwen Henshaw, Marybelle Chase, Jerra Quinton and Paul Austin of the Trail of Tears office in Little Rock, and Patsy Edgar and Anna Smith, both independent researchers. Dr. Daniel F. Littlefield, of the Sequoyah Research Center at Little Rock, was unable to be present during this trip to College Park.

Our research methodology was consistent with the first trip. Gwen Henshaw volunteered to photocopy and the remainder of the team examined the documents in the boxes. Our research team began with Box No. 234.

The research team examined documents in 169 boxes of files and copied 1,747 pages.

The documents that were copied were processed in the same manner as the first set. Fifty two files were completed. We had reached the year 1842.

In September 2007, the sets of files from the two research trips, were scanned to a DVD for backup purposes. On November 4, 2007, Oklahoma Chapter president, Curtis Rohr and Marybelle Chase, deposited the files obtained from the two research trips with Dr. Daniel F. Littlefield at Little Rock, Arkansas.

At the spring meeting of the Oklahoma Chapter in April 2008, Dr. Littlefield informed us that the files had been indexed and were prepared for researchers during the National Trail of Tears Conference and Symposium, September 22-25, 2008.

3

**RESEARCH TRIP JULY 7-12, 2008**

The research team planned to return to College Park, Maryland to continue research in Record Group 217, when it was brought to our attention by Jerry Clark, a staff member at the National Archives, that the entire collection of Record Group 217 was being transferred to the main archives building in Washington D.C. We were later notified by Cynthia Fox, a supervisor at the National Archives, that the records in the boxes were transferred to new boxes. Ms. Fox stated that many of the box numbers had changed; and she advised that the research team could have difficulty in determining where we had finished the project during the previous trip in 2007. Ms. Fox informed the team that the boxes were on the shelves and that we would be able to access them. We learned that box numbers could change at any time; however, file numbers and the year the documents were generated remain the same.

After determining where we finished the research project during the last trip, the research team, Jack D. Baker, Curtis Rohr, Ed and Gwen Henshaw, and Marybelle Chase proceeded to examine the documents beginning with the year 1842. We were joined by Frank Norris of the National Park Service who assisted in the research.

The research team examined eighty-one boxes and returned home with numerous copies of documents. The documents were filed according to year and account number and labeled with an extensive description of the file. Forty-seven files were completed. Research in the year 1844 was not completed during this trip. An inventory was done that is included with this report.

4

**RESEARCH PROJECT RESULTS**

Documents in Record Group 217 for the years 1837-39 contain information concerning the expenses of the round-up of Cherokees, interment and deaths in the camps, and ultimately the Trail of Tears in 1838-39. There is substantial correspondence of Cherokee Chief John Ross, and Major General Winfield Scott, the officer in charge of the Indian removal.

More importantly, information was found by the Oklahoma Chapter research team, regarding the 1838-39 interment of Cherokees in the camps that were located in various locations in the Cherokee Nation East. We learned of the numerous deaths in the camps that were indicated by the payments to grave diggers who were paid $2.50 per grave, and who were also paid for making coffins. The number of graves was indicated in the payment voucher of the particular grave digger. Researchers of the removal can utilize this information to determine with more substantial accuracy the number of deaths that occurred before the Trail of Tears commenced.

We learned that tents were furnished the Cherokees and often the tents were made by Cherokees. The Disbursing Agent, Joel Crittenden, provided at least 3,080 tents for the Cherokees. This fact was not known by any researcher and presents a different aspect about the Trail of Tears.

Of utmost importance regarding the trail is the knowledge that we learned regarding the Benge Detachment’s route of emigration. We have substantial proof that the Benge Detachment traveled to Jackson, Missouri on their way west. This information was also not known before and alters Benge’s route of emigration on the trail.

5

Another item of interest is that the George Hick’s Detachment came into Beatties Prairie in the west and disbanded there. A document that the research team discovered states that agents were stationed at the edge of the prairie to make lists or to re-muster the Cherokees.

Some interesting information that the research team learned during this last trip in July is that oxen were used in the removal and emigration to pull the wagons that were on the trail.

Nearly all the records that the research team examined, evaluated, and digested caused us to recognize that we now have a totally different picture of the removal.

Our research team believes that our research in Record Group 217 was worthwhile and will benefit other researchers. We are of the opinion that we have exhausted the work in this record group. Should our team return to research at the National Archives, we will probably find it necessary to research in other record groups that consist of removal and emigration records.

Finally, we certainly want to share the knowledge that the documents reveal with other researchers and those who would relate the true story of the Cherokees and other tribes’ removal and the Trail of Tears.

6