Trail of Tears National Historic Trail
National Park Service

City of Waynesville
Pulaski County Tourism Bureau

A Trail of Tragedy

During the Trail of Tears, thousands of Cherokee—young and old, rich and poor—faced disease, hunger, exhaustion, and extreme weather as they traveled hundreds of miles mostly on foot. A thousand or more Cherokee died traveling to a land they did not know.

For many Cherokee, the hardships began well before the journey. The government forcibly removed them from their homes in the spring of 1838. They suffered at the hands of white settlers, who seized their last remaining possessions and livestock as federal troops and state militias simply watched. Crowded, filthy removal camps in Tennessee and Alabama held Cherokee families until it was time to depart to the West. There, diseases such as whooping cough, measles, smallpox, typhus, and tuberculosis spread rapidly.

By the time the Cherokee departed from the removal camps, many people were weak, demoralized, and grieving loved ones who had not survived. To avoid the extreme heat of summer, most detachments waited until autumn to begin the trek. Then they faced torrential rains, deep mud, and eventually frigid cold.

"This morning word came that a Cherokee woman was dying. I hastened to her tent…She was put in the wagon which carried her family when the detachment started, but soon expired."

Rev. Daniel S. Butrick diary, March 11, 1839

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