University of West Georgia
Trail of Tears
Trail of Tears National Historic Trail
National Park Service
Georgia Map and Guide

At this very moment a low sound of distant thunder fell upon my ear. In almost an exact western direction a dark spiral cloud was rising above the horizon and sent forth a murmure. I almost fancied a voice of above the horizon and sent forth a dark spiral cloud was rising almost an exact western direction had become farmers and traders, readily adapting self-sufficient, subsistence-based nation of people sprawled along rivers, resembling European-style sheep, and pigs—and cleared land for peach medicines, and materials from their local provided plentiful food as well as oak and buckeye for housing, boats, and tools. A lifetime of knowledge of vegetation, animals, insects, birds, reptiles, and amphibians helped Cherokee to create everything from wasp soup and bloodroot dye to saffron tea and turtle-shell rattles.

Their culture thrived—but so much about their world was changing. Beginning in the mid-18th century, encroachment of white people from the East led to food sources disappearing. Deer, turkey, bison, and elk populations dramatically shriveled from overhunting and loss of habitat due to the establishment of farms and pastures. Road building interrupted game trails and diminished coveted bird nesting sites. Road building interrupted game trails and diminished coveted bird nesting sites. Deer, turkey, bison, and elk populations dramatically shriveled from overhunting and loss of habitat due to the establishment of farms and pastures. Road building interrupted game trails and diminished coveted bird nesting sites.

While the Cherokee continued to gather foods, medicines, and materials from their local landscapes, they also began raising cattle, goats, sheep, and pigs—and cleared land for peach orchards and other agriculture. Settlements changed from compact villages to towns sprawled along rivers, resembling European-style communities. On their own, Georgia Cherokee successfully adapted and developed new market economies. A self-sufficient, subsistence-based nation of people had become farmers and traders, readily adapting to the ways of the white people. How could they know what would happen next.

Assertion of Power

Georgia moved first to remove Indians. In 1802, the Compact of Georgia relinquished the state’s claims to lands west of the Chattahoochee River in return for the federal government’s pledge to remove all Indians from the state as soon as it could be done practically and peaceably.

After gold was discovered in 1828, the state extended its laws over the Cherokee Nation. In 1832, all Cherokee lands were surveyed and distributed by lottery to white residents. This happened in spite of the fact that the Cherokee had been granted the right to their land by previous treaties and by a US Supreme Court ruling. The state of Georgia and President Andrew Jackson ignored Cherokee rights.

The Indian Removal Act, passed by Congress in 1830, provided an exchange of land with the Indians that would move them west of the Mississippi. By the mid-1830s, the Chatickee, Creek, and Chickasaw had arrived in Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma).

In December 1835, a small group of unauthorized Cherokee tribal members (known as the Treaty Party) signed the Treaty of New Echota agreeing to be removed to the West. Even though most Cherokee signed a petition against the agreement, the conditions for removal were set.

In the early spring of 1836, federal troops supported by Georgia militia began filtering into the Cherokee Nation to set up military forts as staging areas to launch the Indian removal. Georgians had waited 34 long years to claim Cherokee land.

Culture Clash

Most Cherokee refused to recognize the Treaty of New Echota and instead relied on their leaders to sway American political opinion in their favor. In the spring of 1838, they started working in their fields just as they had done for generations. They had never believed that they would be forced to leave their homes.

But on May 10, 1838, Major General Winfield Scott issued a dramatic proclamation that would forever change Cherokee lives: Cherokee! The President of the United States has sent me with a powerful army, to cause you … to join … your people … on the other side of the Mississippi. Will you then, by resistance, compel us to return to arms? God forbid! I am an old warrior, and have been present at many a scene of slaughter; but spare me, if I can, to beseech you, the horror of witnessing the destruction of the Cherokees.

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Cherokee memories are starkly different. Ossee-Cha, widow of Sweet Water: The soldiers came and took us from our home. They first surrounded our house and they took the war while we were at work in the fields and they drove us out of doors and did not permit us to go back to our homes. We were driven, a family at a time, and carried them to the post [fort].

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Cherokee removal from Georgia was an American Act of opportunist oppression. Going west, the Georgia Cherokee would be taken from the homes of their ancestors—to a new land, new waterways, new resources. But just as they had adapted to change in Georgia, they would adapt and eventually thrive on the unknown Oklahoma landscape.

Overall, this would not be the case.

Cherokee Expelled

All told, it took 20 days to round up the Cherokee people from home and hearth and march them to camps where they slept on bare ground—adjacent to the forts that had been built for the soldiers and their supplies.

They waited only a few days before transport to Tennessee removal camps, forced to walk up to 100 miles. In Tennessee, many Georgia Cherokee were immediately removed to the West by water on flatboats. The root waited in deportation camps in Tennessee through the summer heat before departing for the West. Both the flatboats and the removal camps were riddled with disease and death.

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The round-up of the Georgia Cherokee proceeded swiftly. Troops knew where Cherokee families lived and how many were in each household. The Georgia militia had constructed 14 round-up forts and camps to take thousands of innocent people as prisoners.

Reverend Daniel S. Butrick ran a mission near Rome and was an eyewitness to the events: Those in two or three days about 4,000 people, many of whom were in good circumstances, and some rich, were rendered homeless, hopeless and penniless, and exposed to all the ills of captivity. In driving them, a platoon of soldiers called before and behind, and a file of soldiers on each side, armed with all the common apalling instruments of death, while the soldiers, it is said would often use the same language as if driving hogs, and goad them forward with their bayonets.

One man, on being pricked thus, and seeing his children thus goaded on, picked up a stone and struck a soldier; but for this he was hand-cuffed and on arriving at the fort, was punished and on starting again was whipped a hundred lashes.

General Scott appealed to the soldiers: Considering the number and tenper of the mass to be removed...it will readily occur, that simple indiscriminations – acts of harshness and cruelty, on the part of the troops, may lead...in the end, to a general war and carnage... Every possible kindness...must, therefore, be shown by the troops...

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The US Army built 14 forts and camps in less than two weeks to meet up with about 5,000 Georgia Cherokee. By the end of June 1838, the ephemeral structures were abandoned.
The National Park Service administers the trail in close partnership with Trail of Tears Associates, the Cherokee Nation, the Eastern Band of Cherokee, federal, state, county, and local agencies, interested groups, and private landowners. Trail sites are in private, municipal, tribal, federal, or state ownership.

Accessing Sites: The Trail of Tears National Historic Trail is under development. It’s not possible to follow the entire trail along the historical course. In most cases travelers will have to follow public roads that are close to the authentic trail. Please ask for permission before visiting any trail sites on private lands and check with public sites for visiting hours and regulations.

For more information on Cherokee history and sites in Georgia, visit www.gastriolestears.com www.nationalparks.org or visit the NPS Trail of Tears website and select Places to go - Travel Routes (from links on the right hand side of the Home page) www.nps.gov/tear

The Different Routes of Travel: While traveling along the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail, you will see a variety of roadway signs meant to help you explore the stories, routes, and sites on the Trail of Tears.

The National Park Service administered the Trail of Tears Alternate Route (Oklahoma) via multiple routes across the country. The Roundup routes were used by the US government starting on May 24, 1838 to gather the Cherokee along the eastern edge of John Ross’s farms. By the end, both river and rail routes had become the official trails that became a key connection in the decision making processes that preceded the Trail of Tears and the Cherokees’ subsequent removal to Indian Territory in 1838-39.

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