



*When I saw them, men, women  
and children, moving along thro'  
the valley towards the far west, . . .  
I could not help but think that some  
fearful retribution would yet come  
upon us from this much impugned  
race. The scene seemed to be more  
like a distempered dream, or  
something worthy of the dark ages  
than like a present reality; but it  
was too true.*

-The Diary of Lieutenant John Phelps,  
June 22, 1838

## Cherokee Homeland

Before the arrival of Europeans, the mountain region of what is today western North Carolina had long been the center of the Cherokee homeland. Here Cherokee built their towns and farmed the valleys formed by the Tuckasegee, Little Tennessee, Hiwassee, and other rivers.

This region holds some of the most significant and sacred Cherokee places, such as Kituwah, considered the mother town of the Cherokee and a site of great religious, cultural, and historical importance. Today these mountains are still the home of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, descendants of those who sacrificed tremendously to remain in their ancestral southeastern lands.

## Removal Decree Sets the Stage

As early as 1803 President Thomas Jefferson supported voluntary Indian removal. But it wasn't until Andrew Jackson was elected president in 1828 that events accelerated. In 1830 Congress passed the Indian Removal Act, which mandated that the Indian tribes move to new lands west of the Mississippi.

What happened in 1835 outraged most of the Cherokee Nation—a small number of unauthorized Cherokee tribal members signed the Treaty of New Echota, accepting \$5 million to leave their ancestral lands and move to Indian Territory. The stage was set for Cherokee removal.

## Forts and Roads

The US Army and state militias built forts and roads in the Cherokee Nation to gather and forcibly remove a nation of people, over 15,000 Cherokee, 3,500 of whom lived in North Carolina.

In order to facilitate the brutal work of collection, imprisonment, and deportation of thousands of people, the US government tallied the number of Cherokee in each community and surveyed roads and trails. The Unicoi Turnpike, established in 1816, supplied an easy removal path as it ran through northern Georgia, western North Carolina, and eastern Tennessee.

Fort Butler had been established in 1836 to keep order after the ratification of the Treaty of New Echota. Two years later, the army quickly constructed four more forts in the surrounding area.

In 1837 the North Carolina legislature approved construction of the Great State Road between Franklin and Fort Butler to expedite the sale and settlement of Cherokee lands. During the spring of 1838 the Old Army Road, stretching between Andrews and Robbinsville, was improved in 10 days from a Cherokee foot path to a wagon road.

From these collection points and conduit paths, all of the North Carolina Cherokee captured by the army were funneled through Fort Butler.

## Doorstep Deportation

In early 1838, army commanders viewed western North Carolina as a hotbed of Cherokee resistance. Rather than revolt, the Cherokee simply ignored the mandate to be removed and went about planting crops and building homes. In early June Capt. L. B. Webster noted, *There are about six thousand in our neighborhood. . . They all remain quietly at work on their little farms. . . They sell us very cheap anything they have to spare, and look upon the regular troops as their friends. . . These are innocent and simple people into whose homes we are to obtrude ourselves. . .*

When the troops began their deportation operations on June 12, Lt. John Phelps said, *. . . seven companies of us marched thither. . . By night fall about a hundred [Indians] had assembled. . . by the morning of the 14th we were all in with nearly a thousand Indians.*

The first deployment of Cherokee left Fort Butler on June 18, 1838, forced to walk 80 miles to the Fort Cass emigration depot in Tennessee. Other groups followed through early July. Due to multiple delays, the Cherokee languished at Fort Cass for months before departing overland to Indian Territory in October.

The Cherokee were assigned to one of three detachments, numbering about 1,000 people each. Cherokee leaders included Baptist preacher Jesse Bushyhead; Situagi (Situwakee), the headman of Hiwassee Town and Aquohee District judge; and Chuwaluka (Choowalooka) or Old Bark of Taquohee. By the time they reached Indian Territory, these detachments had lost 15 percent of their members to disease, exposure, and desertion.

## Resistance in the Mountains

Though the majority of North Carolina Cherokee submitted to forced removal, several hundred disappeared into remote sections of the mountains, becoming fugitives in their native land. The mountain terrain made locating these refugees very difficult. One officer reported, *After three weeks of the most arduous and fatiguing duty, traveling the country in every direction, searching the mountains on foot in every point where Indians could be heard of we [have] not been able to get sight of a single one.* The Cherokee's precise knowledge of the mountains and their communication network flummoxed the soldiers, rendering all attempts to capture them futile.

Some Cherokee families received waivers to remain behind. When wealthy farmer John Welch received his waiver, he encouraged Cherokee to leave home and take to the mountains. He and others covertly fed the fugitives. In the years after removal, Welch's farm was a haven for about 100 Cherokee who escaped the army roundup.

Dickageeska, one of the homeless Cherokee, recalled the steep price of resistance. They were *compelled to subsist on the sap of trees and roots, and nearly all the children. . . died, only two children remained out of a population of near 100 persons.*

Yet by 1840 these Cherokee were forming settlements and reviving the customs of councils, dances, ball playing, and other practices.

## A Persistent People

Cherokee living at Quallatown on the Oconaluftee River successfully demanded exemption from removal under provisions in earlier treaties between the Cherokee Nation and the United States. Known as the Luftee or Citizen Indians, this group eventually coalesced with their neighbors and kinspeople who managed to avoid capture during removal. They formed the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

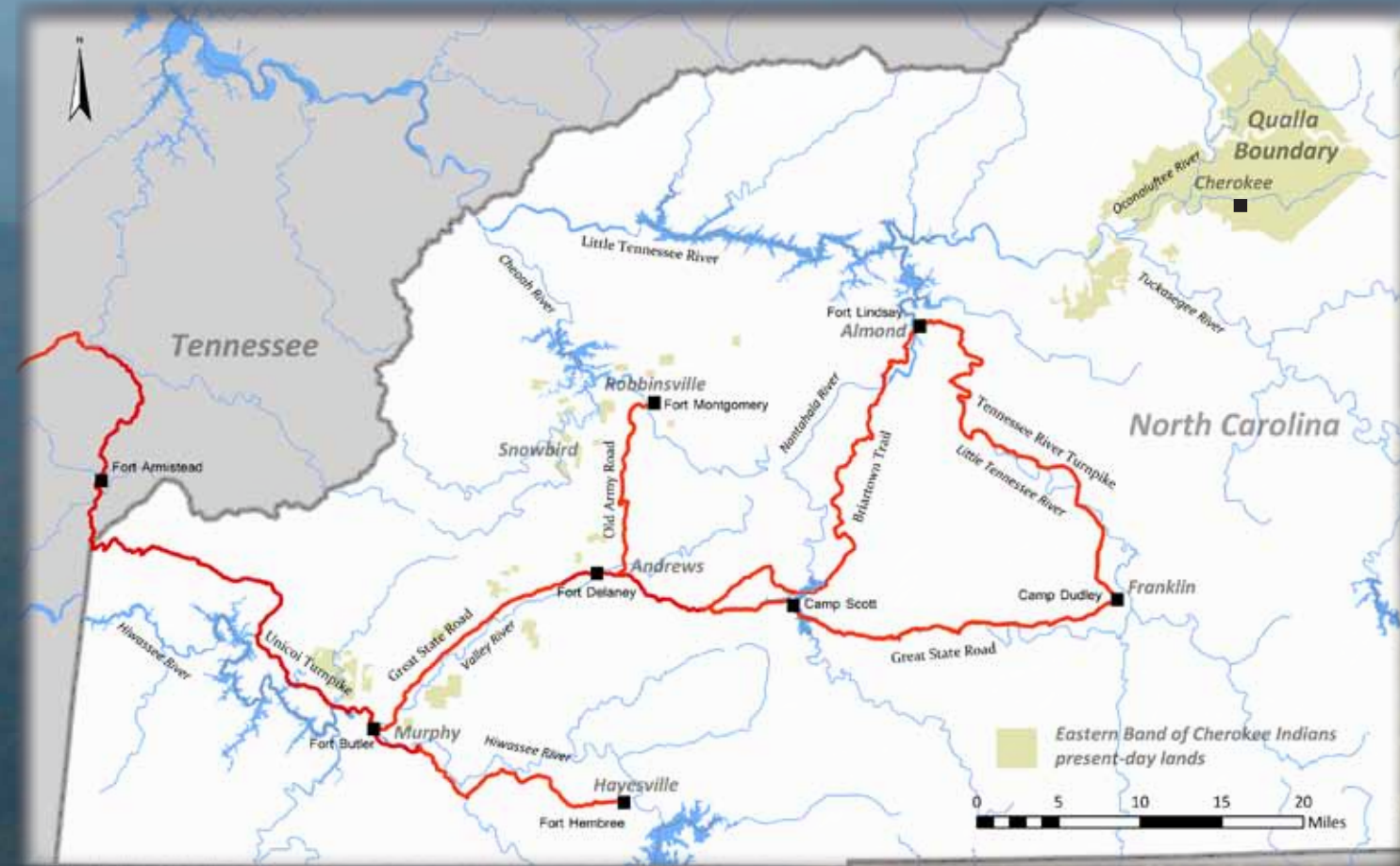
North Carolina acknowledged these Cherokee's right to remain in the state in 1868, and the United States eventually recognized the Eastern Band as a distinct tribe. By 1875 political unification of Cherokee communities led to the emergence of six townships on lands purchased by the tribe and protected under a US government trust.

Today, the Cherokee of North Carolina remain committed to protecting their homeland, while preserving and strengthening Cherokee language, culture, and tribal identity. In recent years, the Eastern Band has even begun to acquire some of the important places taken from them in earlier times, starting with the sacred site of Kituwah.

In western North Carolina, the Trail of Tears is more than a story of loss and injustice. The Cherokee legacy remains one of survival, persistence, and resurgence, as they have successfully rebuilt their lives in both the West (Oklahoma) and North Carolina.



Fort Butler included a blockhouse, palisade, barracks, a hospital, and other buildings. Sketch of Fort Butler, ca. 1837



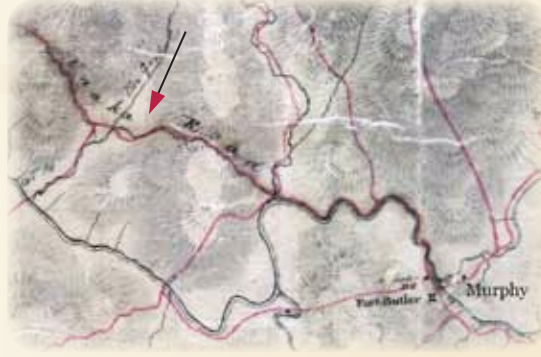
The US Army used five forts and two camps to round up 3,000 North Carolina Cherokee. They were funneled through Fort Butler and marched along the Unicoi Turnpike to Fort Armistead and Fort Cass in Tennessee before the long journey to Indian Territory.

Wayah Bald in the Nantahala Mountains in western North Carolina, looking eastward  
Courtesy Ralph Preston



**FORT BUTLER**  
Near present-day town of Murphy (Cherokee County)  
Coordinates / address for exhibits: 35.08603, -84.03691 / at the historic train depot, on the corner of Hiwassee and Railroad Streets in Murphy

*Site Information:* Fort Butler was the army headquarters for Cherokee removal in North Carolina. Situated on a hill above present-day Murphy, the fort boasted a blockhouse, palisade, barracks, a hospital, and other buildings. Cold, dreary camps, located north and east of the fort, provided temporary housing of Cherokee prisoners. Three thousand Cherokees passed through Fort Butler in 1838 on their way to deportation camps. From this spot, Cherokee prisoners were marched on the Unicoi Turnpike to Fort Armistead in Tennessee and from there to emigration camps near present-day Charleston, Tennessee. This site includes outdoor exhibits.



**UNICOI TURNPIKE TRAIL**  
northern Georgia, western North Carolina, eastern Tennessee  
Coordinates: 35.19425, -84.13775; 35.03731, -83.82380

*Site Information:* The Cherokee exodus from western North Carolina followed the Unicoi Turnpike (Unaka Road), a wagon road built between Georgia and east Tennessee in the early 19th century. The road linked Fort Butler to the internment camps and emigration depot at Fort Cass, present-day Charleston, Tennessee. Cherokee detachments heading westward toiled 80 miles on this road. Today you can walk, drive, or bike in their footsteps.



**CHEROKEE COUNTY HISTORICAL MUSEUM**  
87 Peachtree Street, Murphy (Cherokee County) (828) 837-6792  
Coordinates: 35.08675, -84.03312

*Site Information:* The museum explores Cherokee Indian life during the time of the Cherokee Nation before and after their removal along the Trail of Tears. Its artifact displays contain many items that were used by the Cherokee people in their daily lives, including stone tools, pottery, and other items.



**AQUOHEE DISTRICT COURTHOUSE**  
East of present-day town of Murphy just north of the intersection of Highway 64 and Old Highway 64 (Cherokee County)  
Coordinates: 35.06394, -83.94662

*Site Information:* Exhibits at this site discuss the role of the Aquohee District Courthouse along the Trail of Tears. As the judicial hub in southwestern North Carolina, this site was a center of opposition to removal. In September 1835, US treaty commissioner John Schermerhorn tried to convene a conference here to negotiate a removal treaty, but Cherokee refused to attend. After this failure, Schermerhorn organized the meeting at New Echota that led to the infamous Treaty of New Echota in December 1835.



**VALLEY TOWN BAPTIST MISSION**  
East of present-day town of Murphy at the intersection of Mission Road and Highway 64 (Cherokee County)  
Coordinates: 35.06120, -83.94661

*Site Information:* The Valley Town Baptist Mission was a boarding school that became an important center of Cherokee scholarship and resistance to removal. It contained a model farm, gristmill, and blacksmith shop. It gained acclaim after its directors adopted the Cherokee language for instruction and preaching. The school trained Cherokee leaders such as Peter Oganaya, John Wickliff, and James Wafford, men who led the opposition to removal in North Carolina. This site includes outdoor exhibits.



**FORT DELANEY**  
Near present-day town of Andrews (Cherokee County)  
Coordinates: 35.20535, -83.82970

*Site Information:* When troops arrived in the summer of 1838, several hundred Cherokee hid in the Snowbird and Hanging Dog mountains. In the Valley River area, a small number of Cherokee who had received exemptions from removal worked to conceal and supply the fugitives, providing food and information on the soldiers' activities.



**THE GREAT STATE ROAD AND THE OLD ARMY ROAD**  
Coordinates: 35.26583, -83.81973; 35.20537, -83.82991; 35.17372, -83.70259

*Site Information:* North Carolina built a section of the Great State Road to connect the town of Franklin to Fort Butler. In June and July 1838, more than 1,500 Cherokee prisoners traveled this road as they departed their homeland. The Old Army Road, between present-day Robbinsville and Andrews, was constructed in May 1838 so troops could transport Cherokee prisoners out of the Cheoah Valley area. The road followed a much older Cherokee foot path. Sections of both the Great State Road and the Old Army Road remain intact and visible. This site includes outdoor exhibits.



**JUNALUSKA MEMORIAL & MUSEUM**  
1 Junaluska Drive, Robbinsville (Graham County) (828) 479-4727  
Coordinates: 35.32005, -83.80861

*Site Information:* The burial site of Cherokee warrior Junaluska, in the Great Smoky Mountains near the the Tallualla and Cheoah rivers, is dedicated to preserving Cherokee history and culture. The site includes a museum that displays both Cherokee artifacts and contemporary Cherokee artwork. The nearby Medicine Trail has plants traditionally used by the Cherokee (Joe Pye weed, witch hazel, sassafras, blood root, and others). The trail is about 1/4-mile in length and has a mild-to-moderate climb.



**FORT LINDSAY**  
Near present-day town of Almond (Swain County)  
Coordinates: 35.37566, -83.56242

*Site Information:* Fort Lindsay served as the northernmost military post established to carry out Cherokee removal. North Carolina militia built the post in late 1837, and it served as a gathering point for Cherokee taken from scattered small communities in the surrounding area. Soldiers had a very difficult time finding Cherokee fugitives in the rough terrain and dense forests. Many residents of the nearby Nantahala community successfully eluded capture. This site includes outdoor exhibits.

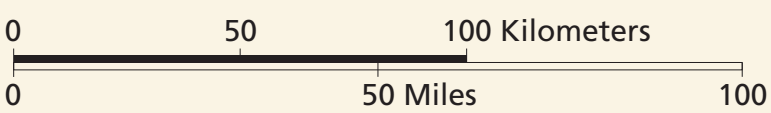
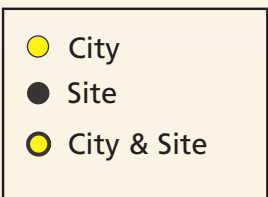


**MUSEUM OF THE CHEROKEE INDIAN**  
589 Tsali Boulevard, Cherokee (Swain County) (828) 497-3481  
Coordinates: 35.48466, -83.31592

*Site Information:* This museum, located on the Qualla Boundary, has exhibits that explain Cherokee life from its early beginnings through the present, including an exhibit on the Trail of Tears. There is Trail of Tears signage located at the front of the building interpreting the site of Qualla Town.



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 administers the trail in close partnership with Trail of Tears Association, 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 North Carolina, visit [www.nctrailoftears.org/](http://www.nctrailoftears.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/trte](http://www.nps.gov/trte)

**ROUNDUP ROUTES**  
During the years of 1838 and 1839 the Cherokee were removed to Indian Territory (Oklahoma) via multiple routes across the country. The Roundup routes, shown here in North Carolina, were used by the US government starting in late spring 1838 to gather the Cherokee from their homes and forcibly place them in removal camps, where they awaited the start of their 800-mile journey. Many Cherokee perished as harsh weather conditions, poor food supplies, and the spread of sickness affected these traveling parties.