In 1835, a minority of Cherokee leaders, acting outside the authority of the Cherokee government, signed the Treaty of New Echota. This treaty set the conditions for removal, in exchange for $5 million, the tribe would relocate to the West. Most Cherokee protested the Treaty, but in 1838, in an event known as the Trail of Tears, over 15,000 Cherokee were forced from their homes, many at the hands of federal troops and state militia. During the process many families became separated, never to see their loved ones again. The journey that lay ahead of them will test the strength and will of each man, woman, and child traveling west to unfamiliar land.

The Tennessee Trail of Tears story is one of removal camps and detachment routes. Cherokee driven from their homes in Georgia and North Carolina arrived in Tennessee, where they wanted to be organized into “detachments” to take them to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma), a home they never wanted. Even as, Tennessee’s legacy today remains rich in Cherokee culture.

At the time the Treaty of New Echota was signed, only the seat of the Cherokee government in New Echota was not the only location of the seat of the Cherokee government in New Echota, but also the home of about 2,500 Cherokee. Prominent leaders Hair Conrad, James Brown, Jesse Bushhead, Lewis Ross, and Principal Chief John Ross all had homes in Tennessee. They lived in communities scattered across the rolling hills and valleys and along the rivers and creeks. Most Cherokee farmed the fertile soils. Some owned prosperous plantations, stores, taverns, and homes. Throughout the years, several mission schools, such as Brainerd, near Chattanooga, provided a place for Cherokee children to learn to read and write in English and to attend Christian church services. In many respects, Cherokee communities did not differ much from those of their American neighbors. In 1838, though, Cherokee life was about to change.

Beginning in late May 1838, thousands of Cherokee, enslaved African Americans, and Creek were taken from their homes by troops and held at removal camps near one of three enrolling depots. Two of these camps were located in the vicinity of Cherokee communities in Tennessee: Ross’s Landing, now known as Chattanooga, and Fort Cass in present-day Charleston. During removal, Fort Cass served as the center for the largest enrolling depot. Removal camps in this area were spread out over a 12- by 4-mile area, extending from Charleston southward. Approximately 7,500 Cherokee were held at these camps prior to their departure to Indian Territory, but poor conditions at the camps led to rapid outbreaks of disease, and many perished before the journey began. How many more families would lose their loved ones before reaching their new homes?

During the 1838 historic map of the Fort Cass area highlighting in blue are the removal camps that were spread across the valley. The trip through Tennessee was not without hardship, the detachment led by John Benge lost some children in the Pulaski area. Other Cherokee also perished while traveling through Tennessee and were buried along the route. It took up to six and a half months for the Cherokee to travel 800 miles to Indian Territory, with the last detachment arriving on March 24, 1839. Hundreds of Cherokee lives were lost along the Trail of Tears. Despite the great loss suffered by the thousands of people who traveled this trail, the Cherokee people today live on as a renewed, invigorated nation.

**Why did they leave?**

**Cherokee communities to removal camps**

**Traveling through Tennessee**

The detachment of the people are very holy [sic] to go on, and annually also go praying for starting each morning. I was not surprised at this because they are moving not from choice to an unknown region nor desired by them.

Detachment Conductor Eliphi Hicks, October 24, 1838

The Cherokee used many different routes to reach their new home in the West—mostly started in Tennessee. In June, three groups of Cherokee left Ross’s Landing to begin their journey to Indian Territory. Dire conditions, disease, and deaths plagued the last two groups. As a result, Principal Chief John Ross and other Cherokee leaders petitioned the US government to allow the Cherokee to control the remainder of their removal. Permission was granted and the remaining Cherokee were organized into detachments of about 1,000 each.

Hair Conrad, James Brown, and Jesse Bushhead each led one of these detachments. Most left from Fort Cass and took the Northern Route, crossing the Tennessee River at Bylby Ferry. On this route, they had to travel the steep roads over the Cumberland Mountains, traveling an average of 10-12 miles a day.

We descended the mountain. The ground was frozen and the mountain steep, and the descent very long, so that I became alarmed, fearing I would scarcely get down...

- Chester B. Battey traveling with the Taylor detachment, November 1838

The Bell detachment, which traveled through southern Tennessee, found the roads equally difficult to traverse. Detachments resupplied at various points along the way, stopping at mills, such as those at Fort Royal, to purchase flour and corn for the next portion of the journey.

The trip through Tennessee was not without heartbreak. The detachment led by Johnson Benge lost some children in the Pulaski area. Other Cherokee also perished while traveling through Tennessee and were buried along the route.

**Traveling through Tennessee**

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used to transport 650-700 Cherokee from Tennessee to Indian Territory.

waiting to cross the Tennessee River on their way to Indian Territory.

involving positioning and the filming of Wild River.

More Sites to See:

BELL ROUTE

BENGE ROUTE

NORTHERN ROUTE

OVERLAND WATER

ROUND UP ROUTES

100 Kilometers

50 Miles

50

100

North

The Trail of Tears National Historic Trail is under development. It is not possible to follow the entire trail along the historical course. In most cases visitors 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.

Accessing Sites

The Trail of Tears National Historic Trail provides a variety of routes to the area to help you access the trail sites, maps, and more.

TRAIL OF TEARS NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAIL ROUTES

ROUND UP ROUTES

WATER ROUTE

OVERLAND WATER ROUTE

NORTHERN ROUTE

TAYLOR ROUTE

BELL ROUTE

Original Route

Auto Tour Route

While traveling along the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail, you may see a variety of resources, signs, and guides to help you explore the trail sites, maps, and more.

The Different Routes of Travel

Between the years of 1837 and 1839 the Cherokee were removed to Indian Territory (Oklahoma) via multiple routes across the country. The Round Up routes were used by the US government starting on May 24, 1838 to gather the Cherokee from their homes and forcibly place them in removal camps, where they awaited the start of their 400-mile journey. The belief, Northern, Logan, and Bell routes were used by different removal detachments. The Trail of Tears National Historic Trail allows you to follow routes taken by Cherokee to their new lands in the West. Many Cherokee avoided some or all of these routes as harsh weather conditions, poor food supplies, and the spread of diseases affected these traveling parties.

The Trail of Tears National Historic Trail is a place of pilgrimage for many Cherokee and non-Cherokee alike. It is a place to remember the thousands of Cherokee who died at the removal camps.

For more information on Cherokee history and sites in Tennessee, visit the Southeast Tennessee Tourism Association website.

www.southeasttennessee.com/where-to-go/26

Visit the National Park Service Trail of Tears website and select the Quicklink: Places to go - Travel Routes.

www.nps.gov/trte

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The National Park Service administers the trail in close cooperation with tribal and state agencies, the Cherokee Nation, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, local communities, and their guests.

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