Tennessee Greenways and Trails
MTSU Center for Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Trail of Tears National Historic Trail

Toby Darden Road
MTSU Center for Historic Preservation

Why did they Leave ?

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 would 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 waited to be organized into "detachments" to take them to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma), a home they never wanted. Even so, Tennessee's legacy today remains rich in Cherokee culture.

The circular Cherokee design to the left symbolizes the holy sun in the form of sacred fire sent by the Creator. The central cross depicts the four logs that keep the sacred fire alive. It is said that the Cherokee will survive as long as the sacred fire burns.

The "Sun Circle" at Ross's Landing, Chattanooga

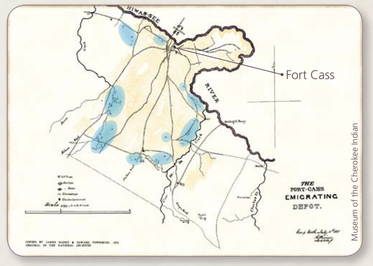
Cherokee Communities to Removal Camps

Principal Chief John Ross
1828-1866

At the time the Treaty of New Echota was signed, southeast Tennessee was not only the location of the seat of the Cherokee government in Red Clay, but also the home of about 2,500 Cherokee. Prominent leaders Hair Conrad, James Brown, Jesse Bushyhead, Lewis Ross, and Principal Chief John Ross all had homes in Tennessee. They lived in communities scattered across the hills and valleys and along the rivers and creeks. Most Cherokee farmed the fertile soils. Some owned prosperous plantations, stores, taverns, and ferries. 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.

Artwork by Harry Fell

Ferry at Chattanooga
In 1816, brothers John and Lewis Ross established the settlement of Ross's Landing. It consisted of a ferry, warehouse, and ferry landing site



Museum of the Cherokee Indian

1838 historic map of the Fort Cass area
Highlighted in blue are the removal camps that were spread across the valley.

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 emigrating 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 emigrating depot. Removal camps in this area were spread out over a 12- by 4-mile area, extending from Charleston southward. Approximately 7,000 Cherokees 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?

Traveling through Tennessee

The detachment of the people are very loth [sic] to go on, and unusually slow in preparing for starting each morning. I am not surprised at this because they are moving not from choice to an unknown region not desired by them.

-Detachment Conductor Elijah Hicks,
October 24, 1838

The Cherokee used many different routes to reach their new home in the West—most 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.

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Toll gates
Many of the detachments traveling the Northern Route were stopped and made to pay a fee at tolls such as this one, a reason why some of the detachments took an alternate route around Murfreesboro to Nashville.

Hair Conrad, James Brown, and Jesse Bushyhead each led one of these detachments. Most left from Fort Cass and took the Northern Route, crossing the Tennessee River at Blythe Ferry. On this route, they had to travel the steep road 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 could scarecely get down...

- Daniel S. Butrick 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 Port 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 John Benge lost some children in the Pulaski area. Other Cherokee also perished while traveling through Tennessee and were buried along the routes.

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.

We are now about to take our final leave and kind farewell to our native land the country that the Great Spirit gave our Fathers, we are on the eve of leaving that Country that gave us birth.
It is the land of our fathers…our sons, and it is (with sorrow) that we are forced by the authority of the white man to quit the scenes of our childhood, but stern necessity says we must go, and we bid a final farewell to it and all we hold dear East of the Father of Waters, the Majestic Mississippi

-Letter by George Hicks Dated November 4, 1838 to John Ross

Hair Conrad Cabin
MTSU Center for Historic Preservation

Artwork by Dorthy Sullivan

With the establishment of the United States and an increasing American population, early US presidents sought to acquire American Indian land for westward expansion.

Trail of Tears
Tennessee

Trail of Tears
Tennessee Map and Guide

BIRCHWOOD

CHEROKEE REMOVAL MEMORIAL PARK: BLYTHE FERRY
6630 Blythe Ferry Lane, Birchwood, TN 37308
(423) 339-2769

***Site Information**: The park contains a visitor center, walking trails, and outdoor interpretive exhibits that explain the history of the Trail of Tears. The park is located on a bluff that overlooks Blythe Ferry, where 9,000 Cherokee and Creek were encamped while waiting to cross the Tennessee River on their way to Indian Territory.*

CHARLESTON

HIWASSEE RIVER HERITAGE CENTER
8746 Hiwassee Street, Charleston, TN 37310
(423) 413-8284

***Site Information:** Charleston was the site of the Indian Agency and later Fort Cass, the military operational headquarters for the entire Trail of Tears removal. This and other stories, including pivotal Civil War positioning and the filming of* Wild River *involving TVA damming, are told at the center.*

Other Sites to Visit:
LEWIS ROSS HOME *(Private property. View from street)*

CHATTANOOGA

AUDUBON ACRES
900 North Sanctuary Road, Chattanooga, TN 37421 *(423) 892-1499*

***Site Information:** Audubon Acres contains the Spring Frog Cabin, a pre-removal Cherokee home, and the visitor center has exhibits on the Brainerd Mission site and on Cherokee culture. At Audubon Acres, visitors can learn about the typical Cherokee agricultural life and their level of acculturation at the time of removal.*

CHATTANOOGA

ROSS'S LANDING & THE PASSAGE
100 Riverfront Pkwy, Chattanooga, TN 37402

***Site Information:** Ross's Landing was one of three emigrating depots for thousands of Cherokee on their way to the Indian Territory. The park contains a historical marker and various memorials dedicated to Cherokee history and culture.*

Other Sites to Visit:
JOHN ROSS HOME (Northern Georgia)
BROWN'S FERRY TAVERN (Restricted, private property)
CHATTANOOGA REGIONAL HISTORY MUSEUM

CHATTANOOGA

BRAINERD MISSION CEMETERY
5700 Eastgate Loop, Chattanooga, TN 37066

***Site Information:** Brainerd Mission once consisted of some 40 buildings, including boarding houses, schools, and churches. During removal, the mission was a stopping point and hospital. Evidence suggests that the mission's cemetery is the final resting place for some Cherokee who died at the removal camps.*

CLEVELAND

HAIR CONRAD CABIN
433 Blythewood Road SW, Cleveland, TN 37311
(423) 476-8942 (by appointment only)

***Site Information:** Hair Conrad lived in this cabin for over 30 years. In 1838 he was selected to lead the first Ross-managed detachment, which traveled the Northern Route from Rattlesnake Springs (near Charleston) to Indian Territory.*

CLEVELAND

RED CLAY STATE HISTORIC PARK
1140 Red Clay Park Road, SW Cleveland, TN 37311 *(423) 478-0339*

***Site Information:** Red Clay was the location of the Cherokee capital before removal. The park contains replicas of 19th-century Cherokee buildings and an interpretive visitor center, which features exhibits on Cherokee life in the early 1800s and on the removal from their homelands.*

TRAIL OF TEARS RETRACEMENT TRAIL
David Crockett State Park
1400 West Gaines, Lawrenceburg , TN 38464
(931) 762-9408

***Site Information:** Visit the Trail of Tears Interpretive Retracement Trail located in David Crockett State Park, and hike a portion of the Bell Route. This route was used to transport 650-700 Cherokee from Tennessee to Indian Territory in 1838.*

LAWRENCEBURG

PULASKI INTERPRETIVE CENTER
220 Stadium St, Pulaski, TN 38478
(931) 424-4044

***Site Information:** In October and November of 1838 the Bell and Benge detachments passed through Pulaski on the Trail of Tears. Explore both indoor and outdoor exhibits at the interpretive center to learn more about the journey of these two detachments and the broader story of Cherokee removal.*

PULASKI

SEQUOYAH BIRTHPLACE MUSEUM
576 State Highway 360, Vonore, TN 37885
(423) 884-6246

***Site Information:** Exhibits at the Sequoyah Birthplace Museum trace American Indian history in the region, beginning with the Paleo-Indian period. A video presentation, map, and pictorial display tell the Trail of Tears story.*

VONORE

PORT ROYAL STATE PARK
3300 Old Clarksville Highway, Adams, TN 37010
(931) 358-9696

***Site Information:** During 1838 and 1839, Cherokee passed through the present-day park as part of the Trail of Tears' Northern Route. Diary records of the removal mentioned Port Royal, the last stop before leaving Tennessee, as an encampment site where the Cherokee stayed to resupply, grind corn, and rest. Within the park are the remains of several old roadbeds.*

ADAMS

More Sites to See:

THE HERMITAGE
4580 Rachel's Lane, Nashville, TN 37076

UNICOI TURNPIKE TRAIL
250 Ranger Station Road, Tellico Plains, TN 37385

TENNESSEE RIVER MUSEUM
495 Main Street, Savannah, TN 38372

JAMES BROWN CHEROKEE PLANTATION *(private property)*
9521 Ooltewah-Georgetown Road, Ooltewah, TN 37363

For more information on Cherokee history and sites in Tennessee, visit the Southeastern Tennessee Tourism Association website.
www.southeasttennessee.com/www/docs/26
or
Visit the National Park Service Trail of Tears website and select the Quicklink: Places to go - Travel Routes
www.nps.gov/trte

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.

Trail of Tears
Original Route

Trail of Tears
Auto Tour Route

While traveling along the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail, you will see a variety of roadway signs meant to help you explore the trail's stories, routes, and sites.

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 800-mile journey. The Water, Northern, Taylor, Benge, and Bell routes were used by different removal detachments during this time period to escort thousands of Cherokee to their new land in the West. Many Cherokee perished along each of these routes as harsh weather conditions, poor food supplies, and the spread of sickness affected these traveling parties.

TRAIL OF TEARS
NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAIL ROUTES
- ROUND UP ROUTES
- WATER ROUTE
- OVERLAND WATER ROUTE
- NORTHERN ROUTE
- TAYLOR ROUTE
- BENGE ROUTE
- BELL ROUTE

0 50 100 Kilometers
0 50 Miles 100

North