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 Cherokees protested the Treaty, but in 1838, in an event known as the Trail of Tears, over 15,000 Cherokees 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 was 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.

**Why did they leave?**

**Cherokee Communities to Removal Camps**

At the time the Treaty of New Echota was signed, 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 ferry houses. 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- to 4-mile area, extending from Charleston southeast. 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 small [sic] to go on, and unusually slow in preparing for starting each morning. I was not surprised at this because they are moving not from choice in 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: one group, the detachment led by Principal Chief John Ross and other Cherokee leaders petitioned the US government to allow the Cherokee to control the removal of their people. Permission was granted and the removal process began in new detachments of about 1,000 each.

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 actually slip down...

- Choral 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 Fort Royal, to purchase flour and corn for the next portion of the journey.

The trip through Tennessee was not without hardships. 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.

**Detour**

**Cherokee**

- We are now about to take our final leave and kind farewell to our native land and the country that the Great Spirit gave our Fathers, we are on the one side of leaving that country that gave us birth, it is the land of our fathers… our own, and it is (with sorrow) that we are forced by the authority of the white man to quit the scenes of our childhood, but we are more than ever our country, and we hasten the end of our journey. We descend the mountain. The ground was frozen and the mountain steep, and the descent very long, so that I became alarmed, fearing I would actually slip down...

- Daniel S. Butrick traveling with the Taylor detachment, November 1838

- With the establishment of the Flexus of Removal and an increasing American population, early US President United States for continued expansion.

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