



When European settlers came to the “New World,” each group of newcomers had their own way of dealing with Native Americans. Some leaders, like Roger Williams and William Penn, negotiated fairly with their counterparts.

Others did not.

By the 1830s, “Americans” wanted to expand their territory. To do so, however, meant taking-over ancestral lands from “Native Americans.” How could the two sides ever agree on such divisive issues as land and culture?

The U.S. National Park Service, which is charged with maintaining important U.S. historical sites, tells us how “Americans” and “Native Americans” grappled with the ancestral-lands issue, during the 1830s. Be warned that the story is not for the faint-of-heart:

In the 1830s the United States government forcibly removed the southeastern American Indians from their homelands and relocated them on lands in present day Oklahoma. This tragic event is referred to as the Trail of Tears as over 10,000 Indians died during removal or soon upon arrival.

Since its inception, the United States government struggled with a problem: greedy citizens and venal politicians in the southeast were bent on acquiring the valuable lands occupied by the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Muscogee (Creek), and Seminole Indians. After the Louisiana Purchase (an enormous acquisition of territory west of the Mississippi in 1803), President Jefferson presumed that these Indians could be persuaded to give up their homes in exchange for land further west.

Following Jefferson’s lead, President Andrew Jackson pushed for the passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830. The act provided funds for the United States government to negotiate removal treaties with the Indians. The federal government coerced tribal leaders to sign these treaties.

Factions arose within the tribes, as many opposed giving up their land. Cherokee Principal Chief John Ross even traveled to Washington to negotiate alternatives to removal and pleaded for the government to redress the injustices of these treaties. The United States government listened, but did not deviate from its policy.

Although President Jackson negotiated the removal treaties, President Martin Van Buren enforced them. The impact of the Removal was first felt by the Choctaw. Starting in 1831, they were forced off their native lands in Mississippi. The years 1836-38 saw the Creeks, Chickasaws, Cherokees, and Seminoles forced from their homes and removed to Indian Territory.

Not all Americans agreed.

For example, Congressman David Crockett of Tennessee [who would later die fighting for the Alamo] sided with the American Indians. Christian missionaries also opposed the Indian Removal Act. They denounced the injustice of the policy. “Will not the people in whose power it is to redress Indian wrongs awake to their duty? Will they not think of the multitudes...swept into Eternity by the cupidity of the ‘white man’ who is in the enjoyment of wealth and freedom on the original soil of these oppressed Indians?” wrote Lucy Ames Butler to her friend Drusilla Burnap in 1839.

Lucy’s husband was the noted missionary Elizur Butler. He accompanied the Cherokee and served as their doctor and estimated that over 4,000 (a fifth of the Cherokee population) died along the trail.

The federal government did not listen to the pleas of Native-American representatives and their American supporters.

Instead, the government forced the tribes to leave their ancestral lands and go to "Indian Territory," an unfamiliar place west of the Mississippi River.

This journey was so traumatic, and so difficult, that it became known as "The Trail of Tears."

What was it like for the people who made the journey? The Cherokee Nation Cultural Resource Center provides that information:

Migration from the original Cherokee Nation began in the early 1800's. Some Cherokees, wary of white encroachment, moved west on their own and settled in other areas of the country. A group known as the Old Settlers previously had voluntarily moved in 1817 to lands given them in Arkansas where they established a government and a peaceful way of life. Later, however, they were forced to migrate to Indian Territory.

White resentment of the Cherokee had been building and reached a pinnacle following the discovery of gold in northern Georgia. This discovery was made just after the the creation and passage of the original Cherokee Nation constitution and establishment of a Cherokee Supreme Court.

Possessed by "gold fever" and a thirst for expansion, many white communities turned on their Cherokee neighbors. The U.S. government ultimately decided it was time for the Cherokees to be "removed"; leaving behind their farms, their land and their homes.

President Andrew Jackson's military command and almost certainly his life were saved thanks to the aid of 500 Cherokee allies at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in 1814. Unbelievably, it was Jackson who authorized the Indian Removal Act of 1830 following the recommendation of President James Monroe in his final address to Congress in 1825.

Jackson, as president, sanctioned an attitude that had persisted for many years among many white immigrants. Even Thomas Jefferson, who often cited the Great Law of Peace of the Iroquois Confederacy as the model for the U.S. Constitution, supported Indian Removal as early as 1802.

The displacement of native people was not wanting for eloquent opposition. Senators Daniel Webster and Henry Clay spoke out against removal. The Reverend Samuel Worcester, missionary to the Cherokees, challenged Georgia's attempt to estinguish Indian title to land in the state, actually winning his case before the Supreme Court.

Worcester vs. Georgia, 1832 and Cherokee Nation vs. Georgia, 1831 are considered the two most influential legal decisions in Indian law. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled for Georgia in the 1831 case, but in Worcester vs. Georgia, the court affirmed Cherokee sovereignty. President Andrew Jackson arrogantly defied the decision of the court and ordered the removal, an act that established the U.S. government's precedent for the future removal of many Native Americans from their ancestral homelands.

The U.S. government used the Treaty of New Echota in 1835 to justify the removal. The treaty, signed by about 100 Cherokees known as the Treaty Party, relinquished all lands east of the Mississippi River in exchange for land in Indian Territory and the promise of money, livestock, various provisions, tools and other benefits.

When these pro-removal Cherokee leaders signed the Treaty of New Echota, they also signed their own death warrants, since the Cherokee Nation Council had earlier passed a law calling for the death of anyone agreeing to give up tribal land. The signing and the removal led to bitter factionalism and ultimately to the deaths of most of the Treaty Party leaders once the Cherokee arrived in Indian Territory.

Opposition to the removal was led by Chief John Ross, a mixed-blood of Scottish and one-eighth Cherokee descent. The Ross party and most Cherokees opposed the New Echota Treaty, but Georgia and the U.S. government prevailed and used it as justification to force almost all of the 17,000 Cherokees from their southeastern homeland.

Under orders from President Jackson the U.S. Army began enforcement of the Removal Act. The Cherokee were rounded up in the summer of 1838 and loaded onto boats that traveled the Tennessee, Ohio, Mississippi and Arkansas Rivers into Indian Territory. Many were held in prison camps awaiting their fate.

An estimated 4,000 died from hunger, exposure and disease. The journey became a cultural memory as the "trail where they cried" for the Cherokees and other removed tribes. Today it is widely remembered by the general public as the "Trail of Tears". The Oklahoma chapter of the Trail of Tears Association has begun the task of marking the graves of Trail survivors with bronze memorials.

The image, at the top of this page, depicts a mural, created by Mary Ann Manzel, which imagines a scene along the Cherokee Trail of Tears. It is located in the town of Talking Rock, Georgia, whose web site [describes the](#)

mural with these words:

The Trail of Tears mural is mounted at the entrance to the Town Park on the side of the pavilion. Local artist Mary Ann Manzel depicts the Cherokee Indians crossing Talking Rock Creek as they traveled in route to Fort Noonan.

Click on the image for a much-better view.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Native-American-Trail-of-Tears-Why-and-How-It-Happened>

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Media Stream



Native American Trail of Tears - Why and How It Happened

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