

The Cherokee people have a long and rich history of a proud, brave, and determined culture. But their history also includes hardship, loss of land, and attempts to destroy and dismantle their traditions and way of life.

The Cherokee Indians settled in the Southeastern United States in the states of Georgia, South Carolina, Tennessee, and North Carolina. They had migrated there in ancient times from the Great Lakes region and their language still reflects the influence of the Iroquois from whom they broke away.

Today they are the largest of the 500+ Native American tribes in the United States, with a population of 314,000. However, when the Spanish explorers first encountered them in the mid-15th century, their numbers may have been well over 500,000 in the region.

An American colonist described the Cherokees as follows:

*The Cherokees are of a middle stature, of an olive colour, tho' generally painted, and their skins stained with gun-powder, pricked into it in very pretty figures. The hair of their head is shaved, tho' many of the old people have it plucked out by the roots, except a patch on the hinder part of the head, about twice the bigness of a crown-piece, which is ornamented with beads, feathers, wampum, stained deer's hair, and such like baubles. The ears are slit and stretched to an enormous size, putting the person who undergoes the operation to incredible pain, being unable to lie on either side for nearly forty days.*

*They that can afford it wear a collar of wampum, which are beads cut out of clam-shells, a silver breast-plate, and bracelets on their arms and wrists of the same metal, a bit of cloth over their private parts, a shirt of the English make, a sort of cloth-boots, and mockasons, which are shoes of a make peculiar to the Americans, ornamented with porcupine-quills; a large mantle or match-coat thrown over all complete their dress. (See page 24 of The Memoirs of Lt. Henry Timberlake: The Story of a Soldier, Adventurer and Emissary to the Cherokees, 1756-1765, originally published in London, during 1765, as The Memoirs of Lieut. Henry Timberlake.)*

During the mid- to late-1700's, as more and more European settlers began to settle on Cherokee hunting grounds, conflicts between the two cultures began to heat up. Many battles sprang up and the Cherokee were fierce defenders of their hunting grounds that they needed to survive, and many settlers were killed. The United States government began to consider the Cherokee, along with other Indians tribes, to be "a problem."

In 1830, the U.S. Congress passed the Indian Removal Act, that rationalized that it was "an effort to prevent the Indians from becoming extinct." In 1836, President Martin Van Buren ordered 7000 armed federal forces to evict the Cherokee from their homeland and relocate them in Oklahoma. This removal is known as "The Trail of Tears."

The Cherokee were forced to walk over 800 miles on a journey that was full of disease, exposure, abuse from the soldiers, and starvation--a journey where over half of the tribe died before arriving in Oklahoma. In true Cherokee fashion, when they arrived on the Oklahoma reservation they tried to make the best of a terrible situation. They built homes, established schools for their children, and began to try to farm on the very poor land they now were forced to live on.

But their culture was still under attack and, in 1883, practicing Native American religions become a federal offense (in the "Code of Religious Offenses").

#### Footnotes:

- 1) Timberlake, Henry, Memoirs of Henry Timberlake, 1765., Wikipedia, Jul/21/2015, Aug/02/2015, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cherokee>

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

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## Map: The Cherokee Country

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