

A Look at the Trail of Tears

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During the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century, dozens of treaties gave up American Indian lands to the U.S. government, which wanted to open the lands to white settlement (and gold mining) as well as to provide a protective buffer between its citizens and the Spanish and others in the West. In his 1829 inaugural address, President Andrew Jackson set a policy of relocating eastern tribes. The federal Indian Removal Act of 1830 called for all tribes east of the Mississippi River to move. Starting in 1838, the U.S. government and military forced more than 16,000 Cherokee from their homes in North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee, sending them west to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma). Thousands died—perhaps a fourth or more of the tribe.

When the first European colonists arrived, the Cherokee controlled a large area, living in parts of eight present-day states. By 1830 the tribe had given up most of its land. The majority of Cherokee, including the tribe's chief, John Ross, opposed removal, but some felt that fighting the process served no purpose and believed their survival depended on another treaty. In December 1835, a few hundred Cherokee—none of them officially elected representatives of the tribe—gathered in New Echota, Georgia, then the capital of the Cherokee nation, to sign a treaty giving the tribe's lands east of the Mississippi River to the federal government, in exchange for five million dollars and new western homelands. Despite the protest of thousands of Cherokee, the U.S. Senate ratified this Treaty of New Echota in May 1836 by one vote.

Two years later, with Martin Van Buren as president and under the direction of General Winfield Scott, federal and state troops rounded up Cherokee into stockades and then internment camps, sending them on land and water journeys of more than a thousand miles. By March 1839, the survivors of this "Trail of Tears" (named from the Cherokee "Nunahi-duna-dlo-hilu-I," or "Trail Where They Cried") had arrived in Oklahoma. Talequah became the new Cherokee capital. The tribe elected Ross principal chief a few months later.

About a thousand Cherokee in North Carolina and eastern Tennessee escaped the roundup. In 1868 a new tribal government was established in the town of Cherokee. Today, the descendants of this group are recognized as the Eastern Band of Cherokee.

The National Park Service maintains a Trail of Tears National Historic Trail. To learn more, access www.nps.gov/trte. These Web sites offer related information: www.cherokeemuseum.org; www.untothesehills.com; <http://oconalufteevillage.com>; and www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/program/episodes/two/trailtears.htm.