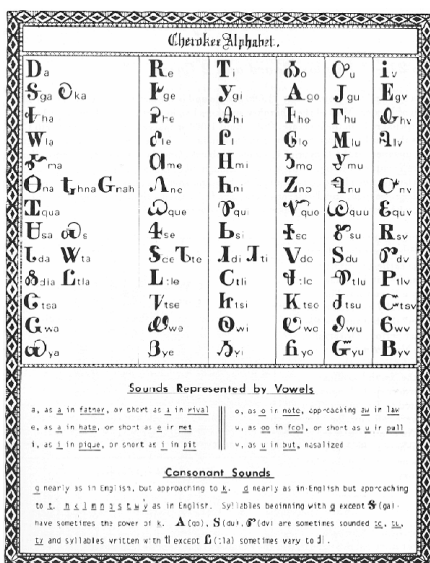


Sequoyah, Inventor of the Cherokee Alphabet

Series: Legends



Sequoyah was born around 1770 in Taskigi in western North Carolina (today this area is part of Tennessee). His mother was Indian and his father was white. He was raised in the tribal ways of the Cherokee and learned to hunt and trap animals. When he grew up, he worked as a hunter and fur trader. He also became a skilled silver craftsman.

According to a legend, one of Sequoyah’s customers suggested that he put his name on the silver jewelry he made. But Sequoyah could not read or write because the Cherokee had no written language, and so he asked a wealthy farmer to help him. The farmer printed both Sequoyah’s Indian name and his English name, *George Gist*. Sequoyah copied the names and began signing his silver work.

Sequoyah grew interested in how English-speaking people used their written language, which Indians called “talking leaves.” He understood that it was an important way to communicate, and in 1809 he began to create a similar writing system for the Cherokee tribe.

At first Sequoyah made small drawings, or pictographs. Each pictograph stood for one word. He carved these images into or drew them onto pieces of tree bark. But this system grew too big, and he threw away his work. When he started over, he created symbols (like letters in the English alphabet) for the eighty-six sounds in the Cherokee language. It took him twelve years to complete the alphabet, or syllabary.

People became suspicious of Sequoyah while he was developing the syllabary. His family and neighbors feared that he was actually practicing witchcraft. Someone even burned down his cabin, destroying his work. But he didn’t give up, because he believed that the Cherokee needed a writing system. By 1821 Sequoyah had perfected the syllabary. He used it to teach his daughter Ayoka to read and write. People in the community came to his house to see demonstrations. In 1822 Sequoyah went to Arkansas to officially present his syllabary to the Cherokee Nation.

Within months thousands of Cherokee had learned to read and write in their own language. The Cherokee National Council awarded Sequoyah a silver medal for his

achievement. In February 1828 the first newspaper published in an American Indian language, the *Cherokee Phoenix*, was established.

In 1828 Sequoyah went to Washington, D.C., to negotiate a treaty for the Eastern Cherokee, who were being removed from their tribal lands. That same year he moved to Oklahoma with 2,500 other Cherokee during the forced march known as the Trail of Tears. There he worked as a silver craftsman and taught his syllabary. He was also active in tribal politics. Sequoyah died in August 1843 while searching with his son for a group of Cherokees in Mexico.

Two species of redwood trees are named for Sequoyah, and a statue in Washington, D.C., honors him. His syllabary is still used today to teach and preserve the Cherokee language.