

1830s

SOUTHEASTERN U.S.



Blankets for the Dead

The Native American tribes uprooted by white settlement and expansion are too numerous to name. For many years, Indians were simply driven back by armed violence or the threat of violence. Then, in 1830, the government began systematically removing all Native Americans from the Eastern U.S.

The removal of the Cherokees from Georgia in 1838 has become known as the Trail of Tears. But there were, in fact, many such trails, as the Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, Seminoles and other tribes were forced to abandon their homelands.



FOR MORE THAN A CENTURY, the Cherokees had watched first the colonies and then the United States chip away at their old tribal territory. In treaty after treaty, they exchanged one more piece of land for one more promise of respect and coexistence.

The Cherokees, like most Eastern tribes, sided with the British during the Revolutionary War because they feared that an independent American republic would take over their land. Shortly after the war, their fears

deepened as the new government claimed all of the remaining Cherokee portions of North and South Carolina and part of those in Tennessee. Shrunken, subjected to constant harassment, in the early 1800s the Cherokee Nation adopted a new strategy for survival.

The tribe already counted among its number many British traders and soldiers who over the years had married Cherokee women. Now the Indians began to adopt the ways of white outsiders. Many took up Christianity. They began to replace their small stick-and-wattle



"A Country More Suitable"

Government treaties with the Indians claimed that removal was in the Indians' best interest.

The Seminole Indians [regard] with just respect the solicitude manifested by the President of the United States for the improvement of their condition, by recommending a removal to a country more suitable to their habits and wants than the one they at present occupy in the territory of Florida.

— *U.S. Treaty with Seminoles, 1832*

The Choctaw people, now that they have ceded their lands, are solicitous to get to their new homes as early as possible, and accordingly they wish that a party may be permitted to proceed this fall to ascertain whereabouts will be most advantageous for their people to be located.

— *U.S. Treaty with Choctaws, 1832*

The Chickasaw nation find themselves oppressed in their present situation Being ignorant of the language and laws of the white man, they cannot understand or obey them. Rather than submit to this great evil, they prefer to seek a home in the west, where they may live and be governed by their own laws.

— *U.S. Treaty with Chickasaws, 1833*



houses with large structures made of logs, lumber or bricks. Textile makers wove cotton and wool cloth to use at home or sell in general stores.

Schoolchildren practiced their arithmetic and learned to read in both English and Cherokee. (The invention of an alphabet by a half-Cherokee, half-white man named Sequoyah brought the Cherokee language into written form.) Cherokee farmers tilled the rich earth of the valleys using foreign methods and equipment, just as whites planted Indian crops. Some wealthy Cherokee landowners even purchased black slaves.

In 1827 the Cherokee Nation adopted a constitution based on that of the United

States. The following year, a bilingual newspaper called *The Cherokee Phoenix* became the first Native American voice in U.S. journalism.

The Cherokees' efforts to coexist didn't prevent some frontier whites from trying to steal their property. Ironically, most of those who harassed the Indians couldn't read the English section of the Cherokee newspaper.

A Congressman from Georgia perpetuated the image of the Cherokee "savage" by publicly declaring that the Indians of his state lived on a crude diet of roots and reptiles. During a Washington dinner party, a visiting Cherokee leader made a point of



Andrew Jackson, who had risen to fame by waging wars against the Creek Indians in Alabama and the Seminoles in Florida, won the presidency in 1828 on a campaign promise of free land for white settlers. Jackson promoted the idea (first proposed by Thomas Jefferson) of moving Indians into unsettled prairie west of the Mississippi to make room for whites. In mid-May 1830, Congress gave Jackson his wish by passing the Indian Removal Act. The law set a new course for Indian/white relations. No longer did the government pretend to desire peaceful coexistence within its borders.

The Choctaws of Mississippi were the first Southeastern tribe to be removed to the West. The Creeks of Alabama and the Chickasaws of Mississippi and Tennessee were relocated next. Beginning in 1835, the Seminoles in Florida fought off the U.S. Army for seven years before finally giving up their homeland.

The Cherokees knew their turn was coming. They knew about the sufferings of the

The majority of whites still regarded Cherokees as ignorant and inferior.

asking the legislator to pass “those roots” — by which he meant the potatoes. In this case, it could be said that “savagery” was in the eye of the beholder.

The Cherokees had transformed their culture in a single generation, in hopes of proving their humanity to their white neighbors and gaining the right to live undisturbed. Still, when it came to changing the government’s attitude toward Indians, cultural transformation wasn’t enough. Despite the outward signs of equality, the majority of whites still regarded Cherokees as ignorant and inferior. This prejudice was heightened by greed: Whites craved Indian land for themselves. And, in Georgia in 1828, the discovery of gold made that land even more desirable.



Far left. The surrender of Creek Chief William Weatherford to Gen. Andrew Jackson in 1814 ended the bloody Creek War and ceded vast tracts of Indian land in Alabama and Georgia to the U.S. government.

Left. Sequoyah’s daughter Anyokah helped him develop the Cherokee writing system around 1820.

Below. Use of the writing system spread rapidly among the Cherokees in the 1820s, giving rise to the publication of the first books and newspapers in a Native American language.

Right. The home of Chief John Ross in Rossville, Ga., demonstrates the extent to which the Cherokees had adapted to white culture before the Removal in 1838.

other tribes. But the Cherokees had kept their faith in "civilization." In 1832, they had appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court and won the right to remain independent and self-governing.

This right existed only on paper. The State of Georgia ignored it, as did Pres. Jackson. Federal agents, armed with ready cash, found a small group of Cherokees willing to sign a removal treaty. In December 1835, the Treaty of New Echota turned over to the U.S. government all that was left of the Cherokee lands (about 35,000 square miles in the region where Georgia, Tennessee and North Carolina meet) in exchange for \$5 million and a parcel of



western prairie.

The vast majority of Cherokees rejected the arrangement and stayed put while its supporters joined a small fragment of the tribe already living in the west. The Cherokees had played by all the rules, but the government kept changing them.

Among the influential whites who spoke out against Indian removal were Davy Crockett and Daniel Webster. But their influence couldn't turn the tide. White squatters interpreted the treaty as permission to seize Indian land. To complete the process, Jackson's hand-picked presidential successor, Martin Van Buren, mobilized an army to evict the Indians.

On a warm week in May 1838, into the peaceful north Georgia towns and farms of the Cherokees marched 7,000 U.S. soldiers. Their orders came directly from the president: Herd every Cherokee man, woman and child off the land.

The commander of this army, Gen. Winfield Scott, asked the Cherokees to cooperate so that his soldiers would not have to resort to physical force or violence. He asked them to help him make the best of a terrible situation. But Scott's vision of an orderly evacuation could not hold. Across Cherokee country, men were ordered at gunpoint from their plows, women from their looms. Jubilant whites looted or burned or occupied the homes left behind.

The experience had been similar for other tribes. One Choctaw elder never forgot the day he and his family were driven from their comfortable Mississippi homeplace: A 5-year-old, he was playing in the front yard when men

Cherokee Alphabet.

D _u	R _a	T _i	o _o	C _u	i _i
S _{qu} O _{ku}	F _{ye}	Y _{yi}	A _{gu}	J _{yu}	E _{gv}
V _{hi}	P _{ho}	J _{hi}	F _{ho}	F _{hu}	G _{hu}
W _{lu}	C _{ho}	P _{hi}	G _{ho}	M _{hu}	A _{lv}
S _{mu}	A _{me}	H _{mi}	S _{mo}	Y _{mu}	
O _{na} L _{na} G _{nah}	A _{ne}	h _{ni}	Z _{no}	A _{nu}	O _{nv}
T _{qua}	Q _{que}	P _{qui}	V _{quo}	Q _{quu}	E _{quv}
U _{su} O _s	A _{se}	b _{si}	F _{su}	E _{su}	R _{sv}
L _{du} W _{lu}	S _{de} U _{te}	J _{di} J _{ti}	V _{do}	S _{du}	S _{dv}
S _{lla} L _{llu}	L _{tle}	C _{tti}	V _{to}	P _{du}	P _{llv}
G _{lsa}	V _{lse}	h _{lsi}	K _{tsu}	J _{tsu}	C _{tsv}
G _{nu}	Q _{nre}	O _{ni}	C _{nu}	J _{nu}	G _{wv}
Q _{lv}	B _{ve}	A _{yi}	h _{vo}	G _{yu}	B _{yv}

Sounds represented by Vowels.

a, as a in father, or short as a in cat
 e, as e in hate, or short as e in met
 i, as i in pig, or short as i in pit

o, as o in low, or short as o in not
 u, as u in foot, or short as u in put
 v, as v in but, nasalized

Consonant Sounds

g nearly as in English, but approaching to k; d nearly as in English, but approaching

came with a wagon and ordered everyone to get in. The strangers made him leave his toys in the dirt, and by the time the wagon pulled out, a white boy — the son of the new household — was already playing with them.

There was little resistance to the Cherokee roundup after all. Although several hundred tribe members escaped into the remote mountains of North Carolina (where their descendants still live today), 15,000 others were held in 13 makeshift concentration camps in North Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee and Alabama until the massive removal to the West could be organized.

For a few of the Cherokees, the difficult

800-mile journey by river and over land began immediately after they were taken captive. The government hired local businessmen along the way to provide the exiles with food, clothing and transportation. These contractors were often willing to endanger Indian lives for the sake of extra profit. Spoiled meat and flour caused widespread sickness. Poor maintenance of riverboats made drownings commonplace. Many Indians preferred to walk rather than board the “death ships.”

A summer drought halted river travel and forced most of the Cherokees to wait in the camps, which amounted to wilderness prisons. Diseases like cholera and

IN CONTEXT

Savages

In 1828 — the same year *The Cherokee Phoenix* began publication — Noah Webster issued his *American Dictionary of the English Language*. This was the first new dictionary produced in the United States, and in it we find the following definition:

SAVAGE, n. A human being in his native state of rudeness; one who is untaught, uncivilized or without cultivation of mind or manners. The savages of America, when uncorrupted by the vices of civilized men, are remarkable for their hospitality to strangers, and for their truth, fidelity and gratitude to their friends, but implacably cruel and revengeful towards their enemies.

Behind the irony of Webster's example lurk the mixed feelings that many white Americans held toward the Indians. On the one hand, the idea of the “noble savage” had been around since the ancient Greeks. It became especially popular in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries, when science began to challenge many religious assumptions.

According to this view, American Indians, like the native inhabitants of

Africa and the Pacific Islands, represented humanity in its original state. Rather than blind souls lost in darkness, noble savages were seen as being good by nature (hospitable, truthful, faithful and grateful, in the words of Webster) because civilization had not yet taught them to be otherwise.

In sharp contrast to this romantic image, however, was the “cruel and revengeful” strain that many whites saw in the Indian character. The possibility that the policies or actions of white settlers were in any way to blame for the hostility they encountered among the natives was too disturbing for most to admit. It was much more convenient to regard Indians as fundamentally different from — and inferior to — whites. Thomas Jefferson could acknowledge the humanity of Indians in theory. But treating them as equals would have challenged his vision of an expanding United States.

Since white settlers couldn't afford to see a reasonable cause for Indian violence, they used this violence to justify their own. Indian resistance only strengthened their resolve to rid the land of what they considered a physical and moral danger.

This vicious circle of reasoning caused whites to commit deeds that belied their own claims to “civilization.”

DOCUMENT

Making Room

In 1830, Pres. Andrew Jackson outlined for Congress his reasons for supporting Indian removal.

Philanthropy could not wish to see this continent restored to the condition in which it was found by our forefathers. What good man would prefer a country covered with forests and ranged by a few thousand savages to our extensive Republic, studded with cities, towns, and prosperous farms, ... occupied by more than 12,000,000 happy people, and filled with all the blessings of liberty, civilization, and religion?

The present policy of the Government is but a continuation of the same progressive change by a milder process. The tribes which occupied the countries now constituting the Eastern States were annihilated or have melted away to make room for the whites.

Three years later, Pres. Jackson made his point even plainer:

That those tribes can not exist surrounded by our settlements and in continual contact with our citizens is certain. They have neither the intelligence, the industry, the moral habits, nor the desire of improvement which are essential to any favorable change in their condition.

Letter from a Choctaw Chief

In his 1832 "Letter to the American People," Choctaw Chief George W. Harkins sought to expose the deception and manipulation behind the government's Indian policy.

It is said that our present movements are our own voluntary acts — such is not the case. We found ourselves like a benighted stranger, following false guides, until he was surrounded on every side, with fire or water. The fire was certain destruction, and a feeble hope was left him of escaping by water. A distant view of the opposite shore encourages the hope; to remain would be inevitable annihilation. Who would hesitate, or who would say that his plunging into the water was his own voluntary act? Painful in the extreme is the mandate of our expulsion. We regret that it should proceed from the mouth of our professed friend, and for whom our blood was commingled with that of his bravest warriors, on the field of danger and death.

But such is the instability of professions. The man who said that he would plant a stake and draw a line around us, that never should be passed, was the first to say he could not guard that line, and drew

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dysentery spread quickly because of the oppressive heat and overcrowding. Many Choctaws died before the journey had really begun.

In October, the remaining 13,000 Cherokee men, women and children in the camps were ordered to gather what belongings they could carry and begin moving West, under the guard of U.S. Army soldiers. Autumn rains had made the rivers navigable again but reduced the roads to quagmires. Cold weather brought new epidemics of whooping cough and measles. The travelers marked every stopping place with new graves. In places where the ground was frozen or there wasn't enough time for burial, they covered the bodies of the dead with blankets.

Other tribes faced the same difficulties. The Seminoles still commemorate a similar experience. To this day, at Seminole funerals, a new blanket is spread over the coffin to symbolize the hardships the ancestors endured during the Removal.

A government agent described the Choctaws' ordeal, as well as his own moral conflict: "They are a wretched set of beings, nearly naked, and have marched the last twenty-four hours through sleet and snow, barefooted. If I could have done it with propriety, I would have given them shoes."

Soldiers who took pity on the Indians and tried to help them could be punished for their actions. In the winter of 1832, a boat loaded with Choctaws got stuck in ice on the Arkansas River near Fort Smith. The lieutenant escorting the party requested extra blankets from the boat's supply. Without them, the stranded Choctaws faced death from exposure. When a superior officer denied the request, the lieutenant physically attacked him in order to get the blankets released. For this attempt to aid the Indians, the lieutenant was dishonorably discharged from the Army.

All told, nearly 100,000 Indians from the five Southeastern tribes walked into exile during the 1830s. More than 4,000 Choctaws, or a quarter of the tribe, perished on the journey. The Creeks and Seminoles suffered even heavier losses. The Seminoles mounted the strongest resistance

to removal, but by 1858, after repeated battles with U.S. forces, barely a hundred of them remained in Florida.

For the survivors of the Trails of Tears, the opportunity to "prosper and be happy," which the treaties had promised, proved an elusive dream. But the sense of tribal identity remained strong. Today, a sacred fire made from coals carried by Cherokee women from their homeland in 1838 still burns near Gore, Okla.

The great Indian removals didn't solve the "Indian problem." They only postponed it. Over the next several decades, as white settlement continued to push westward, Indian removal and containment would resume. The concept of the "reservation" would come to dominate federal policy. And the old tribal worlds would shrink to scattered islands on a map drawn by strangers. ♦

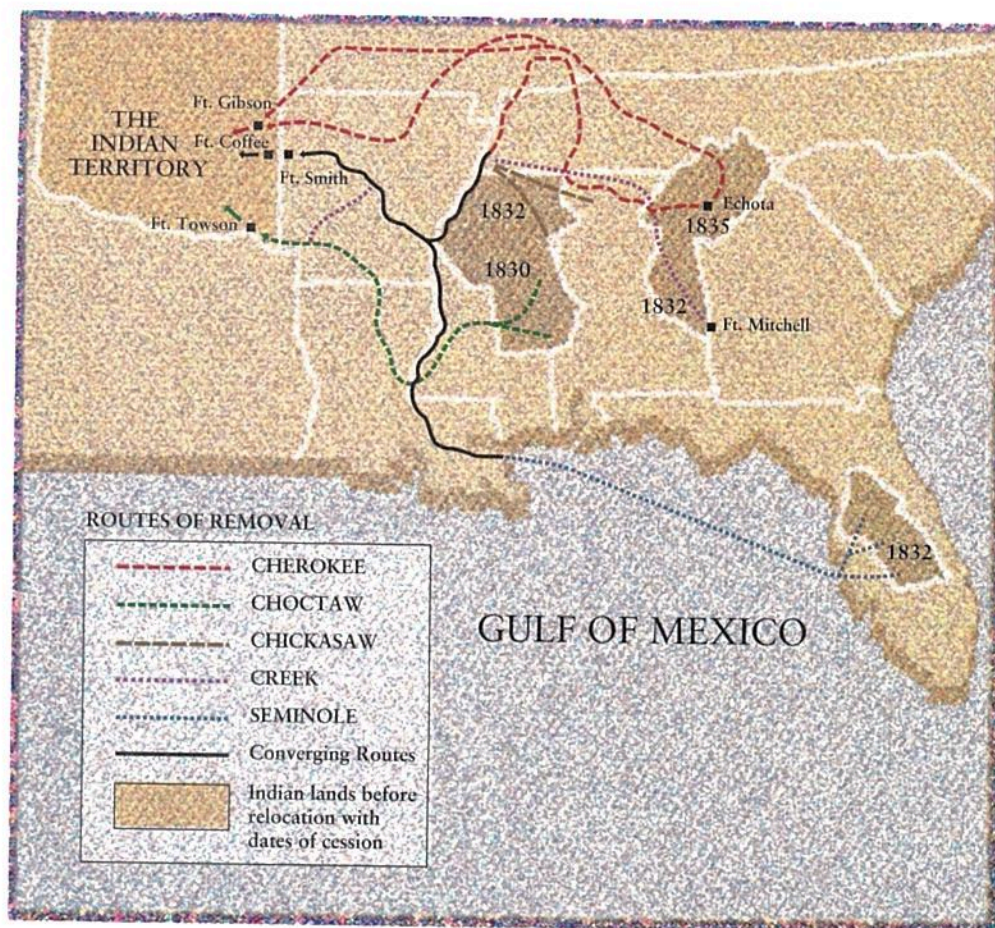
AT ISSUE

This Land Is My Land

Imagine having someone tell you where you can or cannot live. The same attitudes that permitted the government to "remove" tribes from their homelands (whether by bullets or by treaties) have found many different expressions through the years.

Well into the 20th century, African Americans were openly forbidden or discouraged from owning property in certain neighborhoods. Some areas also systematically kept out Jews.

During World War II, Japanese Americans were evacuated from their homes and held in concentration camps, even though they were U.S. citizens. Even today, minorities often encounter illegal obstacles and open resistance when



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Letter from a Choctaw Chief

up the stake and wiped out all traces of the line. I will not conceal from you my fears, that the present grounds may be removed. ... Who of us can tell after witnessing what has already been done, what the next force may be. I ask you in the name of justice, for repose for myself and for my injured people. Let us alone — we will not harm you, we want rest. ... As east of the Mississippi we have been friends, so west we will cherish the same feelings with additional fervour; and although we may be removed to the desert, still we shall look with fond regard, upon those who have promised us their protection. ...

Friends, my attachment to my native land was strong — that cord is now broken; and we must go forth as wanderers in a strange land! ... Let me intreat you to regard us with feelings of kindness, and when the hand of oppression is stretched against us, let me hope that a warning voice may be heard from every part of the U[nited] States, filling the mountains and valleys with echo, and say stop, you have no power, we are the sovereign people, and our red friends shall no more be disturbed.

they attempt to live in mostly white neighborhoods.

These infringements of freedom have sometimes been backed up by vandalism and personal violence. History teaches us that in order for people of different backgrounds or habits or beliefs to coexist peacefully, they first have to respect one another's right to exist at all.

In one way or another, we all prefer the familiar to the unknown. Familiar people, languages, environments and lifestyles help make our lives comfortable and our relationships with others predictable. When we feel that the differences between us outweigh the things we have in common, we sometimes react to each other with hostility and fear. Sometimes, in the back of our minds, we're afraid that what we don't know can hurt us.

Fear of the unknown has been a hidden cause of many human conflicts. From the earliest times, differences of skin color, language, customs and religion have made people suspicious of one another: What are those strangers talking about in their mysterious tongue? Differences challenge our natural assumptions about ourselves, about the "rightness" of the way we are. Often the easiest response is to assume that those who are different must be "wrong."

In 1492, Native Americans and Europeans seemed as different to each other as humans and space aliens would seem today. How would we want a crew of galactic explorers to treat us? How would we treat them?