In 1835, a minority of Cherokee leaders, acting outside the authority of the Cherokee government, signed the Treaty of New Echota. This treaty set the conditions for removal. In exchange for $5 million, the tribe would relocate to the West. Most Cherokee protested the Treaty, but in 1838, in an event known as the Trail of Tears, over 15,000 Cherokee were forced from their homes, many at the hands of federal troops and state militia. During the process many families became separated, never to see their loved ones again. The journey that lay ahead of them would test the strength and will of each man, woman, and child traveling west to unfamiliar land.

The Tennessee Trail of Tears story is one of removal camps and detachment routes. Cherokee driven from their homes in Georgia and North Carolina arrived in Tennessee, where they wanted to be organized into “detachments” to take them to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma), a home they never wanted. Even so, Tennessee’s legacy today remains rich in Cherokee culture.

At the time the Treaty of New Echota was signed, southeast Tennessee was not only the location of the seat of the Cherokee government in Red Clay, but also the home of about 2,500 Cherokee. Prominent leadersHair Conrad, James Brown, Jesse Bushhead, Lewis Ross, and Principal Chief John Ross all had homes in Tennessee. They lived in communities scattered across the hills and valleys and along the rivers and creeks. Most Cherokee farmed the fertile soils. Some owned prosperous plantations, stores, taverns, and ferries. Throughout the years, several mission schools, such as Brainerd, near Chattanooga, provided a place for Cherokee children to learn to read and write in English and to attend Christian church services. In many respects, Cherokee communities did not differ much from those of their American neighbors. In 1838, though, Cherokee life was about to change.

Beginning in late May 1838, thousands of Cherokee, enslaved African Americans, and Creek were taken from their homes by troops and held at removal camps near one of three emigrating depots. Two of these camps were located in the vicinity of Cherokee communities in Tennessee: Ross’s Landing, now known as Chattanooga, and Fort Cass in present-day Charleston. During removal, Fort Cass served as the center for the largest emigrating depot. Removal camps in this area were spread out over a 12- by 4-mile area, extending from Charleston southeast. Approximately 7,000 Cherokee were held at these camps prior to their departure to Indian Territory, but poor conditions at the camps led to rapid outbreaks of disease, and many perished before the journey began. How many more families would lose their loved ones before reaching their new homes?

The Bell detachment, which traveled through southern Tennessee, found the roads equally difficult to traverse. Detachments resupplied at various points along the way, stopping at mills, such as those at Fort Royal, to purchase flour and corn for the next portion of the journey.

The trip through Tennessee was not without heartbreak. The detachment led by John Benge lost some children in the Pulaski area. Other Cherokee also perished while traveling through Tennessee and were buried along the routes.

It took up to six and a half months for the Cherokee to travel 800 miles to Indian Territory, with the last detachment arriving on March 24, 1839. Hundreds of Cherokee lives were lost along the Trail of Tears. Despite the great loss suffered by the thousands of people who traveled this trail, the Cherokee people today live on as a renewed, reinvigorated nation.
trail of tears

The Trail of Tears National Historic Trail is under development. It’s not possible to follow the entire trail along the historical route. In most cases, travelers will have to follow public roads that are close to the authentic trail.

Please ask for permission before visiting any trail site on private lands and check with public sites for visiting hours and regulations.

Accessing Sites

The Trail of Tears National Historic Trail is a valuable educational resource for understanding U.S. history, particularly American Indian history. It provides insight into the experiences of the Cherokee during their forced removal from their homelands in the early 1800s and on the removal from their homelands.

The Different Routes of Travel

Between the years of 1832 and 1839 the Cherokee were removed to Indian Territory (Oklahoma) via multiple routes across the country. The Round Up routes were used by the US government starting on May 24, 1838, to gather the Cherokee from their homes and forcibly place them in removal camps, where they awaited the start of their 800-mile journey. The False, Northern, Tyeus, and Bell routes were used by different removal detachments beginning in the spring of 1838. These routes include routes through Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama. The Cherokee Removal from Tennessee to their new lands in the West. Many Cherokee died along each of these routes as harsh weather conditions, poor food supplies, and the steepness of areas affected these traveling parties.

The Trail of Tears

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While traveling along the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail you will see a variety of things that can help you explore the history, culture, and tradition.