

# Trail of Tears National Historic Trail

Nearly one fifth of the Cherokee population lost their lives along the one-thousand-mile long Trail of Tears. As you ride through southeastern Missouri, passing through country which the Native Americans traveled on foot, imagine the scene in May of 1838 through the eyes of John Ross, Chief of the Cherokee tribe. This was the month that he and his tribe were forced to begin what would come to be known as the Trail of Tears.

Early in the 19th century, the United States felt threatened by England and Spain, who held land in the continent. At the same time, American settlers clamored for more land. Thomas Jefferson proposed the creation of a buffer zone between U.S. and European holdings, to be inhabited by eastern American Indians. This plan would also allow for American expansion westward from the original colonies to the Mississippi River.

Between 1816 and 1840, tribes located between the original states and the Mississippi River, including Chickasaws, Choctaws, Creeks, and Seminoles, signed treaties ceding their lands to the U.S. and made the difficult journey to present-day Oklahoma. The Cherokee Nation, the largest group of Native Americans in the Southeast, was not nomadic like some of the other tribes, but had established communities and cultivated the land. They fought removal from their lands with a combination of passive resistance, national publicity and lawsuits. In 1837 a small group of Cherokees who were not tribal leaders were gathered and pressed into ceding all Cherokee territory east of the Mississippi to the U.S., in exchange for five million dollars and new homelands in Indian Territory. Despite the objections of more than 15,000 Cherokees, the Treaty was ratified by the U.S. Senate- by only one vote.

Nearly two years passed without U.S. government action after the treaty was signed. Chief Ross and many other Cherokee people believed they would be able to remain on their homelands. But during this time, gold was discovered on Cherokee lands. Georgia held lotteries to give Cherokee land and gold rights to whites. Cherokees were not allowed to conduct tribal business, testify in courts against whites, or mine for gold. In addition, Andrew Jackson, who had been a forceful proponent of Indian removal as a military officer, was elected President in 1829. He pushed the Indian Removal Act through both houses of Congress just a year after taking office.

On one unexpected day in May of 1838, the Cherokee Nation was met with a force that would not only kill their pride, but threaten their very lives. State militias and federal troops began forcefully rounding up the Cherokees into stockades to await the beginning of the daunting journey to their new territory in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. Families were separated-the elderly and ill forced out at gunpoint and people given only moments to collect cherished possessions. Chief Ross was part of the last group to take this journey. He watched helplessly as his people were forced to leave the only homes they had ever known. An estimated 4,000 Cherokee people died of cold, hunger and disease on their way to the western lands.

Nearly a year after the first group of Cherokees began the journey, in March of 1839, Chief Ross and his group joined the rest of the survivors in their new territory, and was elected Principle Chief of the reconstituted Cherokee Nation. The Cherokees came to call the journey Nunahi-Duna-Dlo-Hilu-I or Trail Where They Cried. The National Park Service has designated the overland routes as the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail to commemorate and educate the public about this tragic part of our history.

**Source(s):**

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