The Cherokee Response to Removal

The Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of the American Indian

Grade level
7–12

Handouts for this lesson
• “A Witness Remembers the Removal,” by Wahnenauhi (Cherokee), 1889
• 1829 poem, “The Cherokees’ Reply”

Lesson overview and objectives
Students learn about the Trail of Tears and Cherokee history in the early 1800s. They discuss various Cherokee responses to removal and research related events and historical figures.

NCSS Curriculum Standards for Social Studies
INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS

Teacher Background Information
A Brief Cherokee History
The traditional Cherokee way of life required lots of land for trapping, fishing, hunting, and farming, as well as for ceremonies that used wild plants and streams of clear running water. British and European settlers and, later, the U.S. government looked at maps and thought that the Cherokees were using only part of their homeland. For 300 years, soldiers, settlers, missionaries, prospectors, adventurers, travelers, and runaway slaves coveted Cherokee lands, and in 1783, U.S. politicians began to take the “surplus.”

Cherokees Adapted to the Dominant Culture
After the Revolutionary War, Cherokees knew that they would have to adapt to Anglo-American culture to survive. Cherokees became prosperous farmers and, because they lived in the South, some even owned slaves. In 1821, Sequoyah, a Cherokee scholar, invented a way to write the Cherokee language. He also taught many Cherokees to read and write. The Cherokee Phoenix, the first Indian newspaper in North America, was printed in Cherokee and English from 1828–1834. (The Cherokee Phoenix is being published again today as a monthly publication.)

Cherokees Were Forced to Move West
The earliest attempts to remove Native Americans to the West were made by George Washington, who tried to move them from the thirteen colonies to “Indian Territory,” in present-day Indiana. When the Louisiana Purchase opened lands west of the Mississippi in 1803, President Thomas Jefferson suggested that the eastern Indians move west. Between 1808 and 1810, a few Cherokees did migrate to Arkansas. Later, in 1828, after prospectors found gold at Dahlonega (the Cherokee word for “yellow” or “gold”) in Georgia, the Georgians began confiscating the Cherokees’ valuable land. But it was President Andrew Jackson who actually seized Cherokee land for non-Cherokees through the 1835 Treaty of New Echota, forcing the Cherokee removal to the West.

About twenty Cherokees, known as the Treaty Party, signed the Treaty of New Echota, illegally stating that they represented the Cherokees. Official Cherokee leadership questioned their authority; this became the basis for the Cherokee fight against removal. (The treaty was named for New Echota, Georgia, the Cherokee capital, where it was signed.) The treaty transferred all tribal lands east of the Mississippi River to the United States government in exchange for $5 million. Under the treaty, all members of the Cherokee Nation would move to Indian Territory (now in Oklahoma) by 1837. Most Cherokees opposed the Treaty of New Echota. Thousands protested by signing petitions to Congress. The John Ross scroll, which is on exhibit at the National Museum of the American Indian, was signed by more than 15,000 Cherokee individuals. But their efforts failed. By 1839, 16,000 Cherokees were removed from their homeland, many along the “Trail of Tears.”

Cherokees on the Trail of Tears
Although the majority of the Cherokee Nation refused to abide by the Treaty of New Echota and the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1838 and 1839 in the Cherokees’ favor, the U.S. War Department used the treaty to force most of the Cherokees to move from the Southeast to Indian Territory in a journey that became known as the “Trail of Tears.” Soldiers separated individual Cherokees from their family members and possessions, put them in stockades, and guarded them day and night. The prisoners—men, women, and children—were forced to make the 850-mile journey to Oklahoma on foot. Of the 17,000 Cherokees listed in the 1835 census, between 4,000 and 8,000 died during the Trail of Tears and in the following year.

This lesson plan originally appeared in A Pre-Visit Guide for Teachers, published by the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), which opened in Washington, D.C., in September 2004. The lesson, written and developed by Genevieve Simmermeyer (NMAI school programs coordinator) and Leslie O'Flahavan, has been adapted for publication.
One-third of the Cherokee Nation fell to deprivation, disease, and despair.

**The Eastern Band Avoided Removal**

By 1839, most Cherokees had been uprooted from their lands in the Southeast and relocated to Indian Territory. But about 1,000 Cherokees, residents of North Carolina, avoided removal and remained in the highland forests of the Great Smoky Mountains. The Eastern Band of the Cherokee Nation became a federally recognized tribe in 1868.

**Cherokee Culture Survives**

Before Europeans arrived, approximately 30,000 Cherokees lived in what is now the southeastern part of the U.S. By 1700, the Cherokee population had fallen to 16,000. Today, more than 200,000 people identify themselves as Cherokee. Most live in Oklahoma, but the Eastern Band’s 12,500 members live in several communities throughout western North Carolina, including Qualla Boundary—the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Nation reservation—and other states. In 1984 in Red Clay, Tennessee, the Eastern Band and the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma met in their first joint council meeting in 146 years. (Red Clay was the last meeting place of the Cherokee people before Removal.)

It meant a lot when the Eastern Band of Cherokees and the Cherokee Nation got together. Some 20,000 Cherokees were there. Their ancestors had gathered there to speak with one voice, and they did the same. In the face of challenges, Cherokee people carry on by adapting and continuing their customs and language. In fact, although the Cherokees now belong to multiple nations, they are the largest Native American group in the U.S.

You may also want to visit these websites for background information:

- The Cherokee Nation’s official site at www.cherokee.org/Culture/Culture.asp
- Treaty of New Echota
- John Ross Letter
- Information on Sequoyah’s syllabary
- Cherokee Phoenix archives from Hunter Library at Western Carolina University at www.wcu.edu/library/CherokeePhoenix/

**Lesson Procedure**

1. Explain to students that they are going to learn about Cherokee history. Ask them this question: If a much more powerful group of people was forcing everyone in your community to move from your homes, what might you do? What are all the different ways you might respond to this tremendous pressure and threat? List the class members’ responses on the board.

Some possible answers: try to get along with the “invaders,” try to be like them, defy them, appeal to their rulers for help, hide from them, sacrifice a small bit of land or a few people in the hopes that the larger plot of land or group of people will be safe, etc. (You may also want to connect this question to current events.)

2. Present a mini-lecture on Cherokee history based on the Teacher Background
In 1889, the U.S. Bureau of American Ethnology received an unsolicited manuscript from Vinita, Indian Territory, with a letter reading, “Please examine and if of value to you, remit what you consider an equivalent,” signed by Wahnenauhi, whose English name was Lucy Lowery Hoyt Keys. The bureau sent the author ten dollars. In later correspondence, she explained, “The name, ‘Wahnenauhi,’ signed to the Manuscript is my own Cherokee name. You are at liberty to use either Cherokee, or English name in connection with the Manuscript.” Wahnenauhi’s manuscript was published in 1966. Here, she describes a scene from the Removal:

“[P]erish or remove! It might be,—remove and perish! [A] long journey through the Wilderness,—could the little ones endure? [A]nd how about the sick? [T] he old people and infirm, could they possibly endure the long tedious journey; Should they leave?

This had been the home of their Ancestors from time out of mind. Everything they held dear on earth was here, must they leave?

The graves of their kindred forsaken would be desecrated by the hand of the White Man. The very air seemed filled with an undercurrent of inexpressible sadness and regret.

Some of the Cherokees, remained in their homes, and determined not to leave.

For these soldiers were sent, by Georgia, and they were gathered up and driven, at the point of the bayonet, into camp with the others. [T] hey were not allowed to take any of their household stuff, but were compelled to leave as they were, with only the clothes which they had on. One old, very old man, asked the soldiers to allow him time to pray once more, with his family in the dear old home, before he left it forever. The answer was, with a brutal oath, “No! no time for prayers. Go!” at the same time giving him a rude push toward the door. Indians were evicted, the whites entered, taking full possession of every thing left.

1. The Bureau of American Ethnology was a federal agency designated to research and provide insight into the cultures of Native American people.
The Cherokees’ Reply.
To The Proposition That They Should Remove Beyond The Mississippi.

No, never! we wear not the shackles of slaves,
And our fathers’ stern spirits would start in their graves,
If they heard in their loved haunts the stranger’s proud tread,
Trampled lightly the grass that waves o’er their bed.

We own not your laws or your treaties—this soil,
Shall be ours, till your armies have made it their spoil:
For ‘twas ours by the gift, by the charter of God,
Long, long ere its wilds by the white men were trod.

There was strength in the bow of the red hunter then,
And the foe fled before the stern Cherokee men.
Then far as the eye now o’er forest can roam
Was the land of the free, and our own sacred home.

But wo [sic] to the day when a welcoming hand,
Spread the bounteous feast for the white man’s band,
They came to our shores, a lone shelterless few,
They drank of our cup, and they e’er found us true,
But the serpent we cherished and warmed at our breast,
Has coiled round our vitals—let time tell the rest.

—No never: if perish we must from the earth
Let us die where we’ve lived, in the land of our birth.
‘Tis in vain we are told of a lovier [sic] scene
Far away, where the deer rove in forests more green,
Where the step of the stranger will never intrude,
And nature still smile in her own solitude.

You oak, round whose head the red lightnings have play’d
Till its withering form is scarce traced in its shade—
Say! would you its beauty and vigor restore
If you plant it anew on some far distant shore?
Oh no! while its roots cling to where it once grew,
It may linger a life which no man can renew.

It is thus with our race; we can never again
Repeople the forest, nor hope to regain
The power of the past. The dark warriors’ form
Is blasted and bowed by the merciless storm,
Then leave us to die, midst our own native shade,
Where we grow in our pride—there alone let us fade.