

# The Trail of Tears

From the beginning of European colonization of North America, the settlers have had conflict with certain indigenous groups of Native Americans. Many historians hypothesize that the failure of the first British settlement of Roanoke was due to Native American attacks on the colonists. Settlers, particularly those who chose to settle on the frontiers of their colonies often clashed with Native



*Squanto showed the Pilgrims how to grow food in the New England soil. Without his help, the Pilgrims probably would have died.*

American groups. It would be historically inaccurate to say that this is true of all interactions. The Pilgrims would not have survived their first winter without help from the Native Americans. Similarly, the settlers at Jamestown benefited from interactions with some Native American groups. Over time, some groups slowly assimilated into the American culture. Unfortunately, it is impossible to ignore the fact that during the rapid expansion of America during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the treatment of most Native American groups during that time was brutal, uncaring, underhanded, and unfair.

## Involvement in Wars

During the early American wars, there were typically large groups or alliances of Native American groups that fought against the Americans. During the Seven Years war, there were many tribes who sided with the French against the American colonists and British. Several of the larger tribes from the Carolina region, namely the Cherokee and Catawba were allied with the colonists and British. In the New York area, the Iroquois tribe remained largely unaffiliated during the war itself, although they benefited greatly from other tribes losing to the British. The Delaware and Shawnee tribes were two of the largest and most important French allies during the Seven Years War.

The Native Americans were a large part of the British strategy for the War of 1812. The British hoped that they could support a large alliance of Native American groups that would halt American expansion into the Northwest Territories. At this time, the Shawnee tribe were led by a charismatic leader named Tecumseh. During his life, the Shawnee had been forced to move west as American settlers continued to push the frontier further toward the Mississippi River. Tecumseh was able to build a large and powerful confederacy of tribes that were willing to work together to fight against the Americans. The British officially allied with Tecumseh, and early in the war, Tecumseh had several important victories for the British against the Americans. Tecumseh was wounded and died in the battle of the Thames in 1813, and his alliance fell apart soon after that.



*While probably historically inaccurate, this 1915 painting of Tecumseh does show how popular he remained even 100 years after his death.*

## The Indian Removal Act of 1830

By 1830, there were five main Native American groups that were continuing to live on large pieces of land in the Southeast United States. The Seminole Tribe (Florida), Cherokee (North Carolina, Georgia), Creek (Alabama), Choctaw and Chickasaw (Alabama, Mississippi) were living on their lands. In many cases, these lands had been granted to them by official treaties with the American government. George Washington and many other of the Founding Fathers had supported the granting of these lands, and they figured that over time, these tribes would slowly become more integrated into American society as they continued to interact with the American people. Washington proved to be correct, and these tribal groups had adopted many aspects of American life.

Once the cotton gin was invented by Eli Whitney, cotton became the major crop of the Southern States. Prior to the revolution, cotton was only a very small part of the Southern economy, but with this new invention which could easily remove the seeds and make the cotton into an easily sold commodity, cotton plantations exploded. This caused the white residents to want the lands that were being

occupied by these Native American tribes, known as The Five Nations. The people continually harassed the tribal people, trying to steal their land, or simply take it over by occupying it against their will.



*This painting, showing the “Trail of Tears” attempts to capture the loss and sadness of the Cherokee people as they were relocated to Oklahoma, despite most Cherokee signing a petition against the treaty with the government used to move them.*

In 1832, a man named Daniel Worchester was arrested by the state of Georgia for living in the Cherokee land without a license. The Cherokee themselves had no problem with Worchester being there, but the state of Georgia was trying to apply greater pressure to force the Cherokee to leave, so they arrested Worchester and sentenced him to four years in prison. Worchester appealed to the Supreme Court and won his case, arguing that Cherokee land was technically not a part of Georgia and therefore Georgia law did not apply. This only served to enrage the Georgians even more, and the Georgia militia began to threaten war. President Andrew Jackson, aware that South Carolina was also threatening secession, chose to ignore the Supreme Court Decision, and

instead began to focus on trying to negotiate a treaty with the Cherokee that would get them to voluntarily leave their lands.

In 1836, Jackson successfully negotiated a treaty with the Cherokee. All of the other tribes from the Five Nations had “successfully” been relocated. However, his treaty was only with a minority group of the Cherokee nation, and not with their elected officials or leader. Almost 16,000 Cherokee signed a petition arguing that they did not agree with those who had supposedly signed the treaty on their behalf. Nevertheless, the Senate ratified the treaty. The treaty was supposed to trade lands in Oklahoma, which was a federal territory at that point, for Cherokee lands in the East. The treaty also paid for the relocation costs of the Cherokee people. According to the agreement, the Cherokee would leave their lands within two years. Since the treaty wasn’t with the actual tribe, only a small fraction of the tribe had actually left their lands in the agreed upon time.

The federal government had lost all patience for the Cherokee, and decided that it was time for them to leave. President Martin Van Buren sent militia and American soldiers to oversee the forced removal of the Cherokee people from their lands. They were forced to march 1000 miles to their new homes, although they often didn’t have the resources needed for their journey, like sturdy clothing or shoes. Since they were following the routes of other Cherokee who had relocated earlier, some later travelers literally had nothing to live off of because the supplies had been used along the route. Due to diseases, they were not allowed to enter towns or cities for supplies, and in many cases were forced to walk a long way around the towns. At one point, the Cherokee had to sue the government for \$35 per person to pay for the burial expenses of several tribe members who had been murdered by local people. While waiting for a ferry to cross the Ohio River for weeks, many more died. By the time the Cherokee had arrived in Oklahoma, about 4,000 people had died in the journey. This was almost 25% of the people who had begun their journey in Georgia months earlier. This forced relocation of thousands of Native American people came to be called “The Trail of Tears.”

#### Reading Comprehension Questions

1. What was the relationship like between the Native Americans and colonists prior to the War for Independence?
2. How did the technological innovation of the cotton gin contribute to the Native American relocation?
3. Why did most Cherokee feel that the treaty to leave their lands was not legitimate?

#### Write About It

The US Government has been a part of several very bad practices (relocation, slavery.) What do you think we (people 150 years later) should do about this?