

# Indigenous Peoples of Tennessee

Native people have been in what is now known as Tennessee for longer than anyone can document. Our Cherokee people consider the Kituwah Mound, between the towns of Cherokee and Bryson City, NC, as the Mother Town. Archaeologists say the town may date back 10,000 years or more. It is the place where we began. It's why some Cherokees refer to themselves as Anikituwah - the people of Kituwah.

Archaeologists describe the earliest Indigenous people as Paleo-Indians. They lived here at least 12,000-15,000 years ago. They were nomadic people who camped in caves and rock shelters while hunting mammals. They were our ancestors.

A warming of the climate and the extinction of Ice Age animals led to people hunting, turkey, bear, and deer, fishing the streams, and collecting roots, nuts, and seeds. They made tools from stone and bone. This era, beginning 10,000 or so years ago, is known as the Archaic Period. During this time, ancestors of today's Cherokee people began spinning fibers. They began cultivating gourds, sunflowers, and squash about 7,500 years ago.

By 3,000 years ago, the Woodland Period had arrived with more settled villages, the beginning of pottery, and continuing to develop agriculture by including more seed-bearing plants. By the end of this period, maize was being introduced. The bow and arrow was invented during this time. Extensive trade networks continue to grow. Trade routes connected Tennessee to the Ohio River Valley, the Great Lakes area, the Gulf of Mexico, the Mississippi River and the Atlantic Coast. In many cases, these people were not traveling that far, but were trading through intermediaries. Hunting, fishing, and gathering are still major activities.

The Mississippian Period began about 1,200 years ago. During this time, people began living in larger, fortified towns. These towns had large mounds with flat tops where the home of the leader might be located. Other mounds might be the location of a structure that housed sacred ceremonial objects. Some of these mounds had astronomical orientations. The people planted fields of maize, beans, and squashes. They wore shell jewelry, played chunky and stickball, and made beautiful pottery.

The arrival of the Spanish to Tennessee -beginning with Hernan de Soto in 1540-led to what is known as the Historic Period because this was the beginning of written records, although minimal, that give us a glimpse into that period.

When the Spanish, French, English, and other explorers from Europe entered what would later become Tennessee, they encountered our Cherokee people in the east, the Chickasaw in the west, the Shawnee in the northern portion of middle Tennessee and the Creek in the southern middle part of the territory. Our Cherokee women owned and tended the gardens and the children. We trace our ancestry through our mother's clan.



Seven was considered the most sacred number. It represented the four cardinal directions of north, south, east, and west, as well as the world above, the world below, and here where we are on the surface.

The Chickasaw dominated west Tennessee, with the Choctaw to the south, but their territorial claims extended into Kentucky, Mississippi, and Alabama.

Traditional social dances among Tennessee's Native peoples, like those of other Indigenous nations, demonstrate respect and gratitude to the animal world. The dances are performed in a counter-clockwise motion, always keeping the dancer's heart near the fire. The smoke lifts their prayers to the Creator.

The Creek people were concentrated in Alabama and Georgia, but their hunters did make trips into Tennessee. They also waged war on the new white settlements that were being established in the Central Basin.

Creek towns were divided into red and white categories – red for war and white for peace ceremonies. Each town had a large field for farming with each family having a section of its own. At harvest time, people collected food from their own sections, but also donated to a stockpile that would help needy families or visitors.

The Shawnee occupied the central Ohio River valley, but also had some smaller villages along the Cumberland River in the upper region of middle Tennessee. Conflict with the Cherokee and Chickasaw drove them out, but they did continue to conduct hunting forays into the area.

With the arrival of European settlers, life began to change rapidly and significantly. After the British won the French and Indian War, the King of England drew a line down the crest of the Appalachian Mountains and forbade white settlement west of that line as a way to prevent white encroachment onto Indigenous lands.

British settlers ignored the warning and moved across the line to establish the Watauga Settlements in what is now upper East Tennessee. Their "Articles of Association" was the first constitution written by Americans. These Wataugans wanted to purchase the land they were living on and offered the Cherokee wagon loads of trade goods (worth about 10,000 pounds in British currency) for middle Tennessee and Kentucky. This transaction became known as the Transylvania Purchase.

Some Cherokee warriors, led by Dragging Canoe, opposed the treaty. They broke away from the other Cherokee to wage war against the settlers who were illegally living on Cherokee land. They became known as the Chickamauga Cherokees because they settled on Chickamauga Creek near present-day Chattanooga. Dragging Canoe said that settling these lands would be "dark and bloody." His words were prophetic as attacks on white settlements began.

Dragging Canoe and his warriors fought the local militias and protected Cherokee land and people for 18 years (1776-1794) when they finally signed a peace treaty, forced upon them after a Southwest Territory militia unit wiped out Chickamauga towns of Nickajack and Running Water.

Attakullakulla (Little Carpenter), signed the Transylvania Purchase agreement as a means of securing peace between the two sides. His niece, Nanyehi (Nancy Ward), also favored peace.

After her heroics in an engagement with the Creek in 1758, where she took up her dead husband's rifle and rallied the Cherokee warriors to victory, she became a Ghigau, or Beloved Woman.

Once the American Revolution ended, settlers from Watauga, led by James Robertson and John Donelson, began moving into what would become the present-day site of Nashville on the banks of the Cumberland River. This movement was not without conflict as Dragging Canoe and the Chickamauga made many attacks on the settlements until finally being forced into peace.

As the War of 1812 got underway, the Cherokee sided with the Americans against the British and their Creek allies. General Andrew Jackson led a group of Tennessee volunteers against the Creek Indians in Alabama, with an especially important conflict taking place at Horseshoe Bend. Although the Cherokee warriors who accompanied him made Jackson's victory possible, many were disappointed when President Jackson pushed for their removal from their ancient homelands.



One of the most famous participants in that battle was Sequoyah who later created the Cherokee syllabary in 1821. That creation led to the Cherokee Phoenix, the first Indian newspaper in the United States.

That newspaper, printed in both English and the new syllabary, would be used to print Bibles and hymnals, but also to keep the Cherokee people and the nation at large aware of the push for removing Native people from their southeastern homelands. The news stories stirred action among missionaries, for example, to oppose the forced removal.

In 1830 at the urging of President Andrew Jackson, the US Congress passed the Indian Removal Act. Opening new lands to white settlers gained momentum with the discovery of gold in northeast Georgia. Newly available lands would also be a boon for land speculators.

Our people had many reasons for opposing this removal. Most importantly we had a sovereign right to the land. It was also where our ancestors were buried. Sacred sites dotted the landscape. It was our pharmacy with hundreds of plants available for our medicine people to use.

Our principal chief, John Ross, argued against removal, not only through the pages of the Cherokee Phoenix, but also during many trips to Washington, DC. He collected a petition against Removal with more than 15,000 signatures of Cherokee citizens.

There were others who believed that moving west voluntarily was in the best interest of our people. This group, known as the Treaty Party or the Ridge Faction, was led by Major Ridge. This English name was derived from his Cherokee name that meant, "the one who walks on the mountaintop."

Some of the leaders of the Treaty Party, claiming to represent all Cherokee people, signed the Treaty of New Echota, named after the Cherokee capital in northeast Georgia. This treaty was then passed by the US Senate by one vote.

By 1838, when the removal began, Jackson was no longer president. The Trail of Tears, as the removal is often called, took place under his successor, Martin Van Buren.

Under General Winfield Scott's orders, about 2,200 federal soldiers began forcing Cherokee people from their homes at bayonet point. Before the removal actually began many died in stockades due to malnutrition, insufficient food and sanitation, and a lack of medical care. Thousands died along the trail, often the elderly and the small children. More died soon in Oklahoma due to the harsh conditions they had endured while traveling the 900+ miles.

Tension was high in Oklahoma as three groups of Cherokee coalesced into what we now call the Cherokee Nation. Somehow the Old Settlers (the first to move and did so before the Indian Removal Act), the Treaty Party (those who accepted the treaty), and the Ross Factions (those who were removed on the Trail of Tears), had to find ways to work together.

Today the Cherokee Nation and the United Keetoowah Band, descendants of the Old Settlers, are headquartered in Tahlequah, OK. The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, of which I am a member, are descendants of those who avoided removal.

Some of us owned land in our own names, and that ownership was upheld by North Carolina courts; some returned from Indian Territory (Oklahoma); and some eluded the U.S. Army during Removal. We have our tribal offices in Cherokee, NC. The Cherokee Nation, United Keetoowah Band, and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians are the only three federally recognized Cherokee tribes.

Lands in Tennessee and Kentucky that lie west of the Tennessee River, were ceded to the United States in 1818. Andrew Jackson and Isaac Shelby negotiated with the Chickasaws on behalf of the United States government. What is often called the Jackson Purchase is also known as the Chickasaw Session. The land was sold for \$300,000, to be paid at the rate of \$20,000 annually for the next 15 years.

The Chickasaw were left with some territory in northeastern Mississippi and a small tract in Alabama. Today, each of these nations work to maintain their languages, customs, traditions, and sovereignty. To learn more about the history and current status of these tribal nations, along with many others, their websites provide a great deal of information.