

Another important event for the Cherokees, shared with other Southeast peoples, was the game of lacrosse. This game was played between clans from the same villages as well as between clans from different villages (see "Choctaw"). Chunkey, or *chenco*, a game played by throwing sticks at rolling stones, was also popular.

With regard to political and social organization, the many Cherokee villages, about 100, were allied in a loose confederacy. Within each village, there were two chiefs. The White Chief, also called the Most Beloved Man, helped the villagers make decisions concerning farming, lawmaking, and disputes between individuals, families, or clans. He also played an important part in religious ceremonies along with the Cherokee shamans. The Red Chief gave advice concerning warfare. One such decision was choosing who would be the War Woman, an honored woman chosen to accompany braves on their war parties. The War Woman did not fight, but helped feed the men, offered them council, and decided which prisoners would live or die. The Red Chief also was in charge of the lacrosse games, which the Cherokees called the "little war."

From First Contact Through the Colonial Years

Early explorers to encounter the Cherokees were impressed by their highly advanced culture. Hernando de Soto, the Spanish explorer who traveled throughout much of the Southeast, was the first European to come into contact with the Cherokees, when he arrived in their territory from the south in 1540. In later years, occasional French traders worked their way into Cherokee lands from the north. But the most frequent Cherokee-white contacts were with English traders from the east. The traders began appearing regularly after England permanently settled Virginia, starting with the Jamestown colony of 1607 and then, before long, the Carolina colonies.

In the French and Indian Wars, lasting from 1689 to 1763, the Cherokees generally sided with the English against the French, providing warriors for certain engagements. In these conflicts, they sometimes found themselves fighting side by side with other Indian tribes who had been their traditional enemies, such as the Iroquois.

In 1760, however, the Cherokees revolted against their English allies in the Cherokee War. The precipitating incident involved a dispute over wild horses in what is now West Virginia. A group of Cherokees on their journey home from the Ohio River, where they had helped the English take Fort Duquesne, captured some wild horses. Some Virginia frontiersmen claimed the horses as their own and attacked the Cherokees, killing 12. Then they sold the horses and collected bounties on the Cherokee scalps, which they claimed they had taken from Indians allied to the French.

On learning of this incident, various Cherokee bands, led by Chief Oconostota, began a series of raids on white settlements. The Cherokees also managed to capture Fort Loudon in the Great Valley of the Appalachians. The war lasted two years, before the British troops defeated the Cherokees by burning their villages and crops. Even then, the insurgents continued to fight from their mountain hideouts for a period of time. Eventually, war-weary and half-starving, the Cherokees surrendered. In the peace pact, the Cherokees were forced to give up a large portion of their eastern lands lying closest to British settlements.

In spite of the Cherokee War, the Cherokees supported the English against the rebels in the American Revolution of 1775-83. Most of their support consisted of sporadic attacks on outlying American settlements. In retaliation, North Carolina militiamen invaded the Cherokees' territory and again destroyed villages and demanded land cessions.

During the colonial years, the Cherokees also suffered from a number of epidemics. The worst outbreaks—from the dreaded smallpox that killed so many native peoples—occurred in 1738 and 1750.

Tribal Transformation

Still, despite these various setbacks, the Cherokees rebuilt their lives. They learned from the settlers around them, adopting new methods of farming and business. They now were faithful allies of the Americans, even fighting with them under Andrew Jackson in the Creek War of 1813. A Cherokee chief named Junaluska personally saved Jackson's life from a tomahawk-swinging Creek warrior at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend. In 1820, the Cherokees established among themselves a republican form of government, similar to that of the United States. In 1827, they founded the Cherokee Nation under a constitution with an elected principal chief, a senate, and a house of representatives.

Much of the progress among the Cherokees resulted from the work of a man named Sequoyah, also known as George Gist. In 1809, he began working on a written version of the Cherokee language so that his people could have a written constitution, official records, books, and newspapers like the whites around them. Over a 12-year period, he devised a written system that reduced the Cherokee language to 85 characters representing all the different sounds. Sequoyah is the only person in history to singlehandedly invent an entire alphabet (or a syllabary, because the characters represent syllables). In 1821, he finished his vast project. In 1827, the Cherokees wrote down their constitution. And in 1828, the first Cherokee newspaper, the *Cherokee Phoenix*, was published in their language.

The Trail of Tears

Yet, despite the new Cherokee way of life, the settlers wanted the Indians' lands. The discovery of gold near Dahlonega, Georgia, helped influence white officials to call for the relocation of the Cherokees, along with other eastern Indians. In 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act to relocate the eastern tribes to an Indian Territory west of the Mississippi River.

Despite the fact that the principal chief of the Cherokees, the great orator John Ross, passionately argued and won the Cherokee case before the Supreme Court of the United States; despite the fact that Junaluska, who had saved Jackson's life, personally pleaded with the president for his people's land; despite the fact that such great Americans as Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, and Davy Crockett supported the Cherokee claims; still, President Jackson ordered the Indians' removal. And so began the Trail of Tears.

The state of Georgia began forcing the Cherokees to sell their lands for next to nothing. Cherokee homes and possessions were plundered. Whites destroyed the printing press of the *Cherokee Phoenix* because it published articles opposing Indian removal. Soldiers began rounding up Cherokee families and taking them to internment camps in preparation for the journey westward. With little food and unsanitary conditions at these hastily built stockades, many Cherokees died. In the meantime, some Cherokees escaped to the mountains of North Carolina, where they successfully hid out from the troops.

The first forced trek westward began in the spring of 1838 and lasted into the summer. On the 800-mile trip, the Cherokees suffered because of the intense heat. The second mass exodus took place in the fall and winter of 1838-39 during the rainy season; the wagons bogged down in the mud, and then there were freezing temperatures and snow. On both journeys, many Indians died from disease and inadequate food and blankets. The soldiers drove their prisoners on at a cruel pace, not even allowing them to properly bury their dead. Nor did they protect the Cherokees from attacks by bandits.

During the period of confinement, plus the two separate trips, about 4,000 Cherokees died, almost a