

the cherokee removal a brief history with documents

The Cherokee Removal: A Brief History with Documents

the cherokee removal a brief history with documents offers a profound glimpse into one of the most tragic episodes in American history. Often referred to as the "Trail of Tears," this forced relocation of the Cherokee Nation in the 1830s not only reshaped the lives of thousands but also left behind a trove of historical documents that help us understand the complexities and human cost of this event. Diving into these records allows us to explore the political maneuvers, legal battles, and personal stories behind the removal, shedding light on the resilience and struggles of the Cherokee people.

The Background: Who Were the Cherokee?

Before discussing the removal itself, it's essential to understand who the Cherokee were and their place in American society prior to the 1830s. The Cherokee Nation was one of the "Five Civilized Tribes," known for adopting various European-American customs, including a written language developed by Sequoyah and a constitution modeled after the United States government. They primarily inhabited lands in the southeastern United States—modern-day Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Alabama.

This adaptation to settler culture was part of their effort to maintain sovereignty and coexist peacefully. Despite this, the discovery of gold in Georgia and the insatiable appetite for land by white settlers made the Cherokee a target for removal.

The Political Climate Leading to Removal

The Indian Removal Act of 1830

The Cherokee removal cannot be understood without mentioning the Indian Removal Act, signed into law by President Andrew Jackson in 1830. This legislation authorized the federal government to negotiate land-exchange treaties with Native American tribes, ostensibly to allow for peaceful relocation west of the Mississippi River.

However, the reality was far more coercive. The act paved the way for forced removals, often under brutal conditions. Many tribes, including the Cherokee, resisted through political and legal means.

State vs. Federal Tensions

Georgia, in particular, was aggressive in asserting jurisdiction over Cherokee lands, disregarding federal treaties and tribal sovereignty. The state passed laws that stripped the Cherokee of their rights, aiming to force them off their ancestral lands.

This clash between state authority and federal treaty obligations led to a series of court cases that would become landmark moments in Native American legal history.

Legal Battles Documented: Cherokee Nation v. Georgia and Worcester v. Georgia

One of the most illuminating ways to understand the Cherokee removal is through the legal documents and court decisions that surrounded it.

Cherokee Nation v. Georgia (1831)

In this case, the Cherokee Nation sought a federal injunction against laws passed by Georgia that infringed on their rights. The Supreme Court, however, ruled that the Cherokee Nation was not a foreign nation but rather a "domestic dependent nation," limiting their ability to sue in federal court.

This decision was a setback but set the stage for the next, more critical case.

Worcester v. Georgia (1832)

This case involved Samuel Worcester, a missionary living in Cherokee territory, who was arrested under Georgia law. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of Worcester and, by extension, the Cherokee Nation, stating that the state laws had no force within Cherokee lands.

Despite this clear ruling, President Jackson reportedly refused to enforce the decision, allegedly saying, "John Marshall has made his decision; now let him enforce it." This led to the continued erosion of Cherokee rights and ultimately their removal.

The Treaty of New Echota and Its Controversies

One of the pivotal documents in the Cherokee removal story is the Treaty of New Echota (1835). This treaty ceded all Cherokee lands east of the Mississippi to the U.S. government in exchange for land in present-day Oklahoma and compensation.

What makes this treaty particularly significant is that it was signed by a small faction of Cherokee leaders, the Treaty Party, without the consent of the majority or Principal Chief John Ross. The Cherokee National Council condemned the treaty, and many viewed it as illegitimate.

The U.S. government, however, used the treaty as legal justification for the removal.

The Trail of Tears: Documenting the Forced Relocation

The Journey West

The forced removal began in 1838 under the administration of President Martin Van Buren. Approximately 16,000 Cherokee were rounded up and made to travel over 1,000 miles to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma).

The journey was grueling, marked by harsh weather, disease, and inadequate supplies. Historical records, including government correspondence, eyewitness accounts, and Cherokee testimonies, paint a vivid picture of suffering and resilience during this forced march.

Personal Letters and Diaries

Among the most poignant documents are personal letters and diaries from Cherokee individuals and missionaries. These writings reveal the heartbreak of leaving ancestral lands, the determination to preserve culture, and the hope for a new beginning despite overwhelming adversity.

One such letter from a Cherokee woman describes the sorrow of parting from her home and the loss of loved ones along the way, providing a deeply human perspective often absent from official records.

Preservation of Cherokee History Through Documents

The survival of these documents is crucial for understanding the Cherokee removal beyond dates and figures. Museums, archives, and Cherokee institutions have worked tirelessly to collect and preserve treaties, court records, letters, and oral histories.

For researchers and descendants alike, these materials are invaluable for piecing together a fuller narrative and honoring the legacy of those who endured the Trail of Tears.

Insights on the Impact of the Cherokee Removal

The Cherokee removal was not just a physical relocation but a profound disruption to a vibrant culture and society. It exemplifies the devastating consequences of expansionist policies and the failure to respect indigenous sovereignty.

Studying the documents surrounding this event helps us recognize the importance of legal protections, the dangers of political expediency, and the resilience of Native American communities in the face of injustice.

Understanding these lessons is vital in ongoing discussions about Native American rights and historical reconciliation.

Exploring the Cherokee removal through its historical documents offers a layered and compelling story that goes beyond textbook summaries. These records remind us of the human cost of forced migration and the enduring strength of the Cherokee people, whose culture and identity have survived despite tremendous trials.

Frequently Asked Questions

What was the Cherokee Removal?

The Cherokee Removal refers to the forced relocation of the Cherokee Nation from their ancestral lands in the southeastern United States to designated Indian Territory west of the Mississippi River, primarily during 1838-1839. This event is also known as the Trail of Tears.

Why did the Cherokee Removal happen?

The Cherokee Removal occurred largely due to pressure from the U.S. government and settlers who wanted Cherokee lands for agriculture and expansion. The discovery of gold on Cherokee land and the implementation of the Indian Removal Act of 1830 were key factors leading to the removal.

What was the Indian Removal Act of 1830?

The Indian Removal Act was a law signed by President Andrew Jackson in 1830 that authorized the federal government to negotiate treaties to relocate Native American tribes living east of the Mississippi River to lands west of the river, facilitating their removal.

How did the Cherokee Nation resist removal?

The Cherokee Nation legally resisted removal through the U.S. court system, notably winning favorable rulings in *Worcester v. Georgia* (1832) that recognized their sovereignty. They also adopted a written constitution and assimilated many European-American customs.

What role did the U.S. Supreme Court play in the Cherokee Removal?

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Cherokee Nation in *Worcester v. Georgia* (1832), affirming that Georgia laws had no force in Cherokee territory. However, the ruling was largely ignored by President Andrew Jackson and state authorities, which led to the eventual removal.

What were the conditions like during the Trail of Tears?

The Trail of Tears was marked by harsh weather, disease, and inadequate supplies. Thousands of Cherokee people suffered and died during the forced march westward, with estimates of over 4,000 deaths from exposure, starvation, and disease.

What kinds of documents provide insight into the Cherokee Removal?

Documents such as treaties, government correspondence, court decisions, personal letters, and Cherokee Nation records provide valuable insight into the events and experiences surrounding the Cherokee Removal.

How is the Cherokee Removal remembered today?

The Cherokee Removal is remembered as a tragic episode in American history, symbolizing the suffering caused by forced displacement. It is commemorated through memorials, educational programs, and by the Cherokee Nation itself as a reminder of resilience and survival.

Additional Resources

****The Cherokee Removal: A Brief History with Documents****

the cherokee removal a brief history with documents illuminates one of the most tragic episodes in United States history, marked by forced displacement and cultural upheaval. This historical event, often referred to as the Trail of Tears, represents a complex intersection of legal battles, political decisions, and human suffering. Examining the Cherokee removal through original documents sheds light on the legal frameworks, governmental actions, and Cherokee resistance that defined this period.

Context and Background of the Cherokee Removal

The Cherokee Nation, one of the "Five Civilized Tribes," had established a sovereign government, developed a written language, and adopted various aspects of European-American culture by the early 19th century. Despite these efforts to coexist, the discovery of gold on Cherokee lands in Georgia in the late 1820s escalated tensions. The state of Georgia, backed by federal authorities, sought to remove the Cherokee people from their ancestral homelands to open the territory for white settlers.

The Indian Removal Act of 1830, signed by President Andrew Jackson, provided the legal basis for this displacement. This federal legislation authorized the negotiation of treaties to exchange Native American lands east of the Mississippi River for lands west of the river. While framed as a policy of voluntary relocation, the reality was a series of coercive measures that culminated in forced removal.

Legal Struggles and Key Documents

The Cherokee Nation fought the removal through the U.S. legal system, producing significant documents that reveal the complexity of their resistance. The most notable legal battles were *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* (1831) and *Worcester v. Georgia* (1832).

- ****Cherokee Nation v. Georgia (1831):**** The Cherokee sought a federal injunction against Georgia's

laws that infringed on their sovereignty. The Supreme Court declined to hear the case on jurisdictional grounds, categorizing the Cherokee as a “domestic dependent nation,” which limited their ability to seek federal protection.

- **Worcester v. Georgia (1832):** This landmark decision ruled that Georgia laws had no force within Cherokee territory, affirming the tribe’s sovereignty. Chief Justice John Marshall’s opinion emphasized that only the federal government—not states—had authority over Native American affairs.

Despite this ruling, President Jackson reportedly refused to enforce the decision, a critical moment documented in government correspondence that highlights the executive branch’s complicity in undermining judicial authority. These documents underscore the tensions between branches of government and the limitations of legal recourse for Native Americans.

The Trail of Tears: Implementation and Experiences

Following the failure of legal protections, the U.S. government and state authorities moved aggressively to execute removal. The Treaty of New Echota (1835) played a pivotal role. Signed by a small faction of Cherokee without the consent of the majority, it ceded all Cherokee lands east of the Mississippi in exchange for land in present-day Oklahoma and monetary compensation.

This treaty became the justification for forced removal despite widespread Cherokee opposition. Documents such as letters, government orders, and eyewitness accounts describe the harsh conditions of the removal:

- **Forced March:** In 1838, under the supervision of General Winfield Scott, the Cherokee were rounded up and marched westward. The journey spanned approximately 1,000 miles and was marked by severe weather, disease, and inadequate supplies.

- **Casualties and Hardships:** Estimates suggest that around 4,000 of the 16,000 Cherokee who began the journey perished due to starvation, exposure, and illness. Official records and personal testimonies provide a chilling account of the human cost.

The Trail of Tears documents reveal not only the logistical aspects of the removal but also the emotional and cultural devastation experienced by the Cherokee people.

Primary Sources and Their Significance

Several key documents provide invaluable insight into the Cherokee removal:

- **The Treaty of New Echota (1835):** This controversial treaty highlights the divisions within the Cherokee Nation and the federal government’s role in orchestrating removal.
- **Official Correspondence:** Letters between government officials, including President Jackson’s communications, demonstrate political motivations and justifications for removal.
- **Cherokee Petitions and Speeches:** These documents express the Cherokee leaders’ appeals

to Congress and the public, emphasizing their desire to remain on their lands.

- **Eyewitness Accounts:** Diaries and narratives from both Cherokee and U.S. soldiers involved in the removal provide personal perspectives on the ordeal.

Analyzing these documents enables historians to piece together a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the removal process beyond official narratives.

The Broader Implications and Legacy

The Cherokee removal is not only a story of displacement but also a critical chapter in the broader narrative of Native American relations with the United States government. The event reveals the limitations of legal protections for indigenous peoples, the impact of expansionist policies, and the cultural resilience of the Cherokee Nation.

Comparatively, the Cherokee removal shares similarities with other forced relocations of Native American tribes, such as the Creek, Seminole, and Choctaw, each with their own treaties and forced marches. However, the Cherokee case stands out due to their legal battles and the extensive documentation that survives.

The legacy of the removal continues to shape Cherokee identity and political activism today. The Cherokee Nation maintains sovereignty in Oklahoma, and efforts to preserve history and educate the public about the Trail of Tears are ongoing.

Conclusion: Reflecting on Historical Documentation

Exploring the Cherokee removal through original documents offers a critical lens for understanding this dark chapter in American history. These sources reveal the complexities of law, politics, and human endurance involved in the forced relocation. By studying the Cherokee removal a brief history with documents, scholars and readers alike gain a more profound appreciation of the resilience of the Cherokee people and the enduring consequences of policies driven by expansion and displacement.

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