

The forced migration of the cherokee indians essay sample



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The series of events that took place leading up to the Trail of Tears, a forced migration undertaken by the Cherokee Indians of the eastern United States between 1838 and 1839, began in the political arena during the United States' War of Independence. The Cherokee wars and treaties, a series of battles and agreements around this period, effectively reduced Cherokee power and landholdings in Georgia, eastern Tennessee, and western North and South Carolina, that released this territory for speculation and settlement by the white man. Their population about 22, 000 tribesmen in 200 villages throughout the area, the Cherokee had since the beginning of the 18th century remained friendly to the British in both trading and military affairs.

In 1773 the Treaty of Augusta, concluded at the request of both Cherokee and Creek Indians, ceded more than 2 million tribal acres in Georgia to relieve a seemingly hopeless Indian indebtedness to white traders. In 1775 the Overhill Cherokee were persuaded the Treaty of Sycamore Shoals to sell an enormous tract of land in central Kentucky. Although this agreement with the Transylvania Land Company violated British law, it nevertheless became the basis for the white takeover of that area. Threatened by colonial encroachment upon their hunting grounds, the Cherokee announced at the beginning of the American Revolution their determination to support the crown (Benson, 1961).

Despite British attempts to restrain them, in July 1776 a group of 700 Cherokee under Chief Dragging-canoe attacked two U. S. held forts in North Carolina, Eaton's Station and Ft. Watauga. Both assaults failed, and the tribe retreated in disgrace. These raids set off a series of attacks by Cherokee, <https://assignbuster.com/the-forced-migration-of-the-chokeee-indians-essay-sample/>

Cree, and Choctaw on frontier towns that would cause a vigorous response by militia and regulars of the Southern states during September and October. At the end of this time, Cherokee power was broken, crops and villages destroyed, and warriors dispersed. The humiliated Indians could win peace only by surrendering vast tracts of territory in North and South Carolina at the Treaty of DeWitt's Corner and the Treaty of Long Island of Holston. Peace on the frontier only lasted for the next two years. Cherokee raids flared up again in 1780 during American preoccupation with British armed forces elsewhere, a group led by Col. Arthur Campbell and Col. John Sevier soon brought them under control. At the second treaty of Long Island of Holston previous land cessions were confirmed and additional territory turned over (Agnew, 1980).

After 1800 the Cherokee were able to assimilate remarkably well. The Cherokee formed a government modeled on that of the U. S. under Chief Junaluska they aided Andrew Jackson against the Creek and in particularly in the Battle of Horseshoe Bend. They adopted white methods of farming, weaving, and home building. The most remarkable of all was the syllabary of the Cherokee language, developed in 1821 by Sequoyah. This syllabary was a system of writing in which each symbol represents a syllable that was so successful that almost the entire tribe became literate within a short time. Shortly afterwards a written constitution was adopted and religious literature blossomed that included translations from the Christian scriptures. Even an Indian newspaper the Cherokee Phoenix began publication in February 1828. But the Cherokee's rapid acquisition of white culture did not protect them against the land hunger of the settlers (Agnew, 1980).

They even tried to establish a state within a state in northwestern Georgia. Several treaties with the United States seemed to establish the legality of their government. But Georgia would not recognize the Cherokee Nation. It passed a law in 1828 declaring all Cherokee laws void and the region part of Georgia. The Indians challenged this law in the Supreme Court. In *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* (1831), Chief Justice John Marshall had ruled that the Cherokee were “not a foreign state, in the sense of the Constitution” and therefore, could not sue in a United States court. But in *Worcester v. Georgia* (1832). When gold was discovered on Cherokee land in Georgia, agitation for the removal of the Indians increased. In December 1835 the Treaty of New Echota, signed by a small minority of the Cherokee, ceded to the U. S. all their land east of the Mississippi River for \$5 million dollars.

The overwhelming majority of the Cherokees refused to accept the treaty and took their case to the Supreme Court of the United States. The court rendered a decision in favor of the Indians, declaring that Georgia had no jurisdiction over the Cherokees and no claim to their lands. Georgia officials ignored the court’s decision and President Andrew Jackson refused to enforce it. The president took the states rights position in the controversy that arose between the Cherokee Indians and Georgia. Jackson subscribed to the theory, advanced by Jefferson, that Indians were “savage” because they roamed wild in a trackless wilderness. The “original inhabitants of our forests” were “incapable of self-government,” Jackson claimed, ignoring the fact that the Cherokee lived settled lives and had governed themselves without trouble before the whites arrived (Benson, 1961).

The Cherokee inhabited a region coveted by whites because it was suitable for growing cotton. Since most Indians preferred to maintain their tribal ways, Jackson pursued a policy of removing them from the path of white settlement. This policy seems heartless to modern critics, but since few Indians were willing to adopt the white way of life, most contemporary whites considered removal the only humane solution if the nation was to continue to expand. Jackson insisted that the Indians receive fair prices for their lands and that the government bear the expense of resettling them. He believed that moving them beyond the Mississippi would protect them from the “ degradation and destruction to which they were rapidly hastening... in the States.” Many tribes resigned themselves to removal without argument. Between 1831 and 1833, some 15, 000 Choctaws migrated from their lands in Mississippi to the region west of the Arkansas Territory. In Democracy in America , the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville described “ the frightful sufferings that attended these forced migrations,” and added sadly that the migrants “ have no longer a country, and soon will not be a people.” He vividly described a group of Choctaw crossing the Mississippi River at Memphis in the dead of winter:

The cold was usually severe; the snow had frozen hard upon the ground and the river was drifting huge masses of ice. The Indians had their families with them, and they brought in their train the wounded and the sick, with children newly born and old men upon the verge of death. They possessed neither tents nor wagons, but only their arms and some provisions. I saw them embark to pass the mighty river and never will that solemn spectacle fade

from my remembrance. No cry, no sob, was heard among the assembled crowd; all were silent.

Tocqueville was particularly moved by the sight of an old woman whom he described in a letter to his mother. She was “naked save for a covering which left visible, at a thousand places, the most emaciated figure imaginable...To leave one’s country at the age to seek one’s fortune in a foreign land, what misery!” “In the whole scene,” he went on, “there was an air of ruin and destruction, something which betrayed a final and irrevocable adieu; one couldn’t watch without feeling one’s heart wrung.”

Jackson backed Georgia’s position. No independent nation could exist within the United States, he insisted. In 1838, after Jackson had left the White House, the United States forced 15, 000 Cherokee to leave Georgia for Oklahoma. At least 4000 of them died on the way; the route had been named the Trail of Tears. Jackson’s willingness to allow Georgia to ignore decisions of the Supreme Court persuaded extreme southern states righters that he would not oppose the doctrine of nullification should it be formally applied to a law of Congress. They deceived themselves; Jackson did not challenge Georgia because he approved of the states position. He spoke of “the poor deluded...Cherokees” and called Williams Wirt a lawyer who defended their cause a “truly wicked” man. When Georgia officials ignored the court’s decision and President Jackson refused to enforce it the Cherokees were evicted under the Indian Removal Act of 1830 (Agnew, 1980).

The eviction and forced march took place during the fall and winter of 1838-39 and was badly mismanaged. Inadequate food supplies led to terrible suffering, especially after frigid weather arrived. The journey took 116 days, many were because the escorting troops refused to slow or stop so that the ill and exhausted could recover. When the main body had finally reached its new home in what is now northeastern Oklahoma, new controversies began with the settlers already there. Feuds and murders happened to the tribe as reprisals were made on those who had signed the Treaty of New Echota. In Oklahoma the Cherokee joined four other tribes, the Creek, Chickasaw, Choctaw and Seminole, all forcibly removed from the Southeast by the U. S. Government in the 1830's. For three quarters of a century each tribe had a land allotment and a quasi autonomous government that resembled that of the U. S (Benson, 1961).

In preparation for Oklahoma statehood some of this land was allotted to individual Indians; the rest was opened up to white homesteaders, held in trust by the federal government or allotted to freed slaves. Tribal governments were effectively dissolved in 1906 but have continued to exist in a limited form. Some Indians now live on tribal landholdings that are called reservations. In the late 20th century there were approximately 47, 000 Cherokee descendants living in eastern Oklahoma and about 15, 000 full bloods. At the time of the removal in 1838 a few hundred Cherokee escaped to the mountains and furnished the nucleus for the 3, 000 Cherokee who now live in western part of North Carolina (Agnew, 1980).

In researching for this topic I watched the documentary The Trails of Tears: Cherokee Legacy and gave it me a more in-depth picture of the actual migration of the Indians of southeastern part of the United States. This latest documentary recounts the Cherokee's expulsion from the Southeast in the early nineteenth century. Cherokee removal is a familiar topic and one of the best known, most thoroughly studied and most extensively commemorated episodes of Native American history. While the film didn't give much new information and the accounting of the political background to the forced removal is standard. The strongest of the film deals with the actual forced migration itself. The film documents the rounding up of the Cherokee families, who met the invasion of their country with what the filmmakers rightly call passive resistance. It depicts the removal stockades where sickness took many more lives than were lost on the trail itself (Richie and Heape, 2007).

Many historians today have been looking deeper into the affects that the march had on the Cherokee's social structures and foundations that helps to give a deeper understanding of this dark event in the history of the United States. A book by Carolyn Ross Johnston focuses on the dramatic changes in the lives of Cherokee women between 1838 and 1907. It helps the reader to understanding gender in the historical context. Johnston discussed how bureaucrats and missionaries focused on transforming Cherokee concepts of gender equities and sexual openness to the Christian ideals of the day that subordinated women to their male relatives. Johnston argues that the degree of acceptance of this colonial message correlated with class.

Wealthier women largely accepted a middle-class European gender status,

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while the majority of Cherokee women did not. By the end of this period, however, economic changes eroded the positions of even the most traditional women. In 1827, the new Cherokee constitution disenfranchised women, denying not just their right to vote but also their ability to hold formal offices. During the removal, women's experiences differed from men's. Rape and difficult pregnancies on the trail debilitated women, while the inability of men to protect and provide for their families injured them. Family, the heart and soul of Cherokee life, fell victim to this massive calamity. The experiences of the rich, who were often married to whites, and those of the poorer Cherokees contrasted dramatically.

During the Civil War and Reconstruction, both the importance of class distinction in experiencing the horrors of the time and the depreciation of women's roles continued. By 1863, a third of Cherokee women were widowed and primary family caretakers. However, their families were now fundamentally disrupted, as were the formerly strong women's alliances. Elite women, who had relied on slaves and husbands, found themselves toiling in unfamiliar ways. The Cherokee nation ended the war once again having to rebuild and redefine itself. After the war, pressures to assimilate continued to increase, and the federal government, which viewed the Cherokee as southern supporters, showed little flexibility. A highlight was the Cherokee Female Seminary that educated women in a Western style (Johnston, 2003).

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