

Cherokee Nation

Archeological evidence suggests that the Cherokees emigrated from the upper Ohio River Valley to the southern Appalachian Mountains. In 1540, the tribe encountered Hernando de Soto, the Spanish explorer, in the upper Allegheny Mountains during the early European exploration of the North America.

The Cherokees occupied vast areas of North and South Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee, Georgia and Alabama. An estimated 200 villages were located among the Great Smoky Mountains, the Blue Ridge Mountains, and the Great Valley of Tennessee. They spoke dialects of the Iroquois language. In Iroquoian, they called themselves “Ani-Yun-Wiya”, meaning “Real People”.

Cherokees made flat or peaked roof homes made out of logs, bark, and branches plastered with mud and clay. Ceremonies took place in large circular or seven-sided domed structures on mounds in the villages. Log stockades enclosed villages, protecting them from enemy attacks. The majority of villages had populations of about two hundred people, although some grew to two or three thousand.

The Cherokees were farmers, hunters, fishers, artists, traders and warriors. Rivers, streams, and vegetables grown in the rich farmland provided food for the village. Surrounding hunting areas yielded abundant game. The people produced and traded crafts including plaited basketwork, stamped pottery, carved wooden “Booger” masks, and carved stone effigy pipes.

Socially, the Cherokees were divided into seven matrilineal clans: Wolf, Deer, Bird, Paint, Blue, Wild Potato, and Long Hair. Family and social relationships were based on clan kinship. Customs forbade marriages inside one’s own clan. Each village had its own chief. Villages were autonomous but allied in a loose confederacy during times of war. During wartime, a “red” chief governed the village. During peacetime, a “white” chief was in command.

By the end of the 1820s, the Cherokees had established a republican form of government, grouping their villages to create the Cherokee Nation. Their written constitution, adopted in 1827, provided for an elected Principal Chief, a Senate, and a House of Representatives. Intermarriage with whites produced a new class of Cherokees. Christian missionaries had established missions and schools and large numbers of the Cherokees became Christians. Several young men had attended eastern schools and colleges. Sequoyah, a mixed-blood Cherokee, worked for 12 years convert the spoken tongue to a written language. He invented a syllabary with 85 characters representing each sound in the language. A tribal newspaper, the *Cherokee Phoenix*, was published in both English and Cherokee.

In spite of the new Cherokee way of life, settlers wanted their lands. The discovery of gold in the Cherokee area increased pressure by Georgians in particular to remove Indians from the newly organized states. President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act in 1830, providing for the removal of the tribe to the “Indian Territory.” Following a long political struggle within the nation and with the Federal government, the main body of the tribe removed in 1838 and 1839.

Chickasaw Nation

The ancestral home of the Chickasaw was located in northern Mississippi with additional territory in part of what is now western Tennessee, western Kentucky, and eastern Arkansas. The tribe is closely related to the Choctaws. Both speak the Muskogean language and both had cultural ties to the Creeks living in Alabama and Georgia. Their legends are similar to the Choctaw and Creek immigration legends, which say they came to Mississippi from the North. Like other southeastern tribes, the first European to identify the tribe was De Soto in 1540. The De Soto narrative identifies them as “Chicaza”.

Although closely related to the Choctaws in language and customs, the two tribes were mutually hostile. The Chickasaws often fought with neighboring tribes and were enemies of the French, with whom the Choctaws were friendly.

During the colonial period, the Chickasaw allied with the English. In the American Revolution, the Chickasaws did not support either side, although some individual tribal members fought for the English and some for the Americans.

In the Chickasaw religion, everything in the universe had a religious purpose or significance. They kept a lunar calendar and held celebrations at the beginning of each new full moon. They had a concept of “heaven” and “hell”, and religion also had medicinal purposes. The social structure, consisting of clans and totemic divisions, was also divinely ordained.

Clan membership was matrilineal (descendants traced through the mother’s line) and the traditional government was matriarchal. All chiefs became such through clan and totemic membership. The tribe was divided into two divisions – Imosaktea and Intcukwalipoa, with the Imosaktca having precedence and providing the chiefs. Each band was autonomous with a separate government; together they confederated into a nation.

There were a number of clans, and members had to marry outside their clans. Mothers were completely responsible for raising girls; men retained that responsibility for boys.

Chickasaw villages were generally built on high ground, safe from flooding. Villages were placed near stands of hardwood trees. They also sought fertile soil for planting vegetables. Houses were the typical pole-frame construction of the Southeast with a variety of materials as coverings – grass thatch, cane, bark or hide.

Life was organized on a household level. Each household had a winter and a summerhouse. Hunting and fishing were important and corn, melons and pumpkins were raised. The Chickasaws also had a thriving trade with other tribes. At one time the Chickasaw language served as a medium of commercial and tribal communication for all the tribes along the lower Mississippi River.

Chickasaws began to migrate west as early as 1822. In 1837 the majority of the tribe removed west to Indian Territory.

Choctaw Nation

The Choctaws belong to the Muskogean linguistic family and according to tradition, originated from a sacred hill called “Inanih Wayiass” in Northern Mississippi. They are often classified as part of the “mound builders” culture of the Southeast. The first recorded European contact was in 1540, when the Choctaws fought a losing battle with the De Soto expedition.

Choctaws were reported to have been the most highly skilled farmers in the southeast, with large fields of corn, beans, squash, sunflowers and melons, and later cotton, grown in the fertile lands of the lower Mississippi River valley. Hunting and fishing were secondary in importance to agriculture.

Houses were built like those of most southeastern tribes with pole frames, and roofs and walls of woven mats of grass, reeds and branches covered with clay or crushed shells, or occasionally animal skins. Families had two houses: a summer house and a winter house which was heated by hot stones over which water was poured to produce some moisture. By the beginning of the 19th century, houses and mansions of brick and stone in the southern plantation style began to appear.

Socially, the tribe was organized into two groups of families under which there were several clans. Marriages occurred outside the clan. As a matrilineal culture children belonged to, and were the responsibility of the mother’s clan. A father had no control over the children.

Originally a matriarchy organized according to the ancient tribal clans, the Choctaws later became one of the most democratic of the Indian nations. Choctaw women were placed in a prominent and powerful position. Choctaws were noted for their educational efforts, aided by enlightened missionaries.

In the pre-colonial and colonial periods, the Choctaws were important allies of the French, who had established themselves along the lower Mississippi Valley. They generally sided with the French during the French and Indian Wars. They also sided with the Americans against Spain after it had gained control of the Gulf area. During and after the colonial period, Choctaws generally sided with the Americans. Although they disliked war, they fought under American generals in the American Revolution, the War of 1812, and the Creek War of 1813-14.

At one time one of the most powerful of the southeastern tribes, the Choctaws occupied what is now northern and central Mississippi and much of Alabama, extending east to parts of Georgia. Before removal, a series of eight treaties had reduced their lands to just a part of Northern Mississippi.

In the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek in 1830, the Choctaws ceded their lands to the United States. The treaty permitted those who wished to remain in Mississippi to do so, and many bought land, becoming United States citizens. This group later became known as the Mississippi Choctaws. The Choctaws were the first tribe to be relocated. Their removal, from 1831 to 1834, was full of hardships from beginning to end. By the time the Choctaw Nation became a part of Oklahoma in 1907, the Choctaws had been a party to 16 treaties and agreements with the United States.

“Oklahoma” is derived a Choctaw word meaning “Red People”.

Muscogee/Creek Nation

The Creek Tribe, first identified by Hernando de Soto in 1540, was essentially a loose confederacy of 40 to 50 autonomous towns, each with its own organization, and speaking versions of the Muscogean language. As with the Chickasaws and Choctaws, legends suggest an earlier migration from the North. It is also thought that the Creeks may be descendants of the “mound-builders” of the southeastern Indian cultural area.

The Creeks were the largest and most powerful of the southeastern tribes. The largest and most powerful bands within the Creek confederacy were the Muscogee, which gave the name to one of the most important language families. Other important tribes speaking derivations of the basic Muscogean language were the Alabamas, Coushahattas, Chickasaws, Choctaws and Seminoles.

The “Creek” name was given to the tribe by the early British settlers because the 40 to 50 villages of the Creek confederacy were all located on creeks and streams in what is now most of Georgia, Alabama, parts of northern Florida, eastern Louisiana and southern Tennessee. The towns were also grouped into two broad areas as “upper Creeks” and “lower Creeks”.

The villages of the confederacy were the principal political units. Each village was autonomous in local government. Each village had a “Mico” or chief, who was not an absolute ruler as in some other southeastern tribes. The “Mico” was essentially a “mayor”, who was assisted by a council of elders. He attained his position by demonstrated leadership and clan relationship, after approval by the council. A vice-chief was selected in a similar manner.

Villages were organized into “towns”. Certain Red towns were for “warriors” while certain White towns were for “peacemakers”. Red Creeks launched raids for honor or revenge and held war ceremonies. White Creeks kept track of alliances, gave sanctuary to refugees and held “peace” ceremonies.

The Creeks were organized into clans with the female line determining the clan. Marriage between members of the same clan was not permitted. The oldest maternal aunt trained the girls, while men were responsible for the boys.

For food, the Choctaws hunted and farmed. Housing was the southeastern pole frame type, covered with reeds, grass, or branches woven into mats and plastered with mud. As with other southeastern tribes, each family had a winter house and a summerhouse as well as a granary for winter storage of grain and vegetables.

Burials were made in the bed in which the person had slept. Children were often buried in the house in which they had lived, in order to ease the mother’s mourning. The religion was a combination of priests and shamans. Medicine men were trained in schools and functioned in three classes or levels.

Because of their central location in the southeast between English, Spanish and French settlements, the Creeks played an important role in colonial affairs. For most of that period, Creeks were allies of the British. Creek warriors joined Carolina militiamen in fighting Indians allied with the Spanish, and the Choctaws who were allied with the French. They joined the British during the French and Indian wars of the mid-1700s. Essentially, the Creeks were playing the white powers against each other.

The Creek War of 1813-14 pitted the Red Stick Creeks against the White Stick Creeks in civil war. Eventually, federal and state troops mobilized under General Andrew Jackson defeated the Red Stick Creeks. To punish the Creeks, Jackson forced them to sign the Treaty of Horseshoe Bend, which took away 23 million acres of land from the Creek Nation.

The Creeks lost the remainder of their ancestral land following passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830. Starting their forced removal in 1836, the Creeks lost about 3,500 of the 15,000 persons forced to leave the Southeast for Indian Country west of the Mississippi River.

Seminole Nation

The word “Seminole” is loosely interpreted as “Runaways” in the Muskogean language to which the Seminole language is related. The Seminoles of the historic period were groups of lower Creeks and other Indian tribes who migrated south to escape the British and Spanish slave raiders in the early 1700s. They declared themselves separate from the Creeks and joined remnants of the aboriginal Indians such as the “Mikasukis” who had survived British campaigns. Negro slaves who sought and were given refuge, also swelled the ranks of the Seminole.

The Seminoles lived in open-sided Mikasuki “Chickees” grouped in villages built near rivers. The Chickee was an open-sided structure made from Palmetto trees, with pole frames, thatched roofs and raised platforms and well-suited for the warm, wet climate. They were farmers as well as hunter-gatherers.

During the American Revolution, Florida Indians were for the most part allies of the British. Soon after the war, they made peace with the Spanish. Failure of the Spanish to meet American demands to force the Seminoles to return fugitive slaves led to the first Seminole War in 1818 and was one of the reasons stated for acquiring Florida, then under Spanish control. General Andrew Jackson led 3,000 troops into Florida and forced the Seminoles to cede much of their territory to the United States.

After passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, most Seminoles were shipped west by water to New Orleans, and then up the Mississippi and Arkansas rivers. The Indians did not have enough food or blankets and many died of starvation and disease. Survivors were not even allowed to stop and bury their dead.

Many of the Seminoles refused to leave Florida and set the stage for the Second Seminole War of 1835-42. The Seminole leader Osceola, using guerrilla tactics, won a great victory against a much larger force of federal troops. The Third Seminole War lasted from 1855 to 1858 and once again the army could not contain the Indians. Tired of war, most of the Seminoles agreed to move to Indian Territory when relatives were brought from the territory to meet with them. About 150 of the Seminoles fled into the unexplored Everglades wilderness and remained in Florida.

The Seminole Nation did not sign a treaty with the United States until 1991.