28. REMOVAL OF THE CHEROKEES

Essay by *Michael D. Green & Danney Goble*

Until the 1830s, the Cherokees claimed and used a large area of southern Appalachia. Most of this territory they reserved for hunting and shared much of it with other tribes. Their villages were concentrated in a core area in present-day eastern Tennessee, western North Carolina, and northern Georgia. This rugged mountainous country with its lush river valleys was beautiful and secure but difficult to traverse, a factor that encouraged the development of regional clusters of towns in the eastern, central, and western portions of the core.

The Cherokee population may have been as high as thirty thousand in the sixteenth century, but exposure to contagious European diseases such as smallpox and measles led to terrible rates of illness and death and a steady decline in Cherokee numbers. The Cherokees were agriculturalists, hunters, and gatherers who depended largely on corn and deer for their food. They therefore selected their village sites with an eye on both soil fertility and proximity to deer herds.

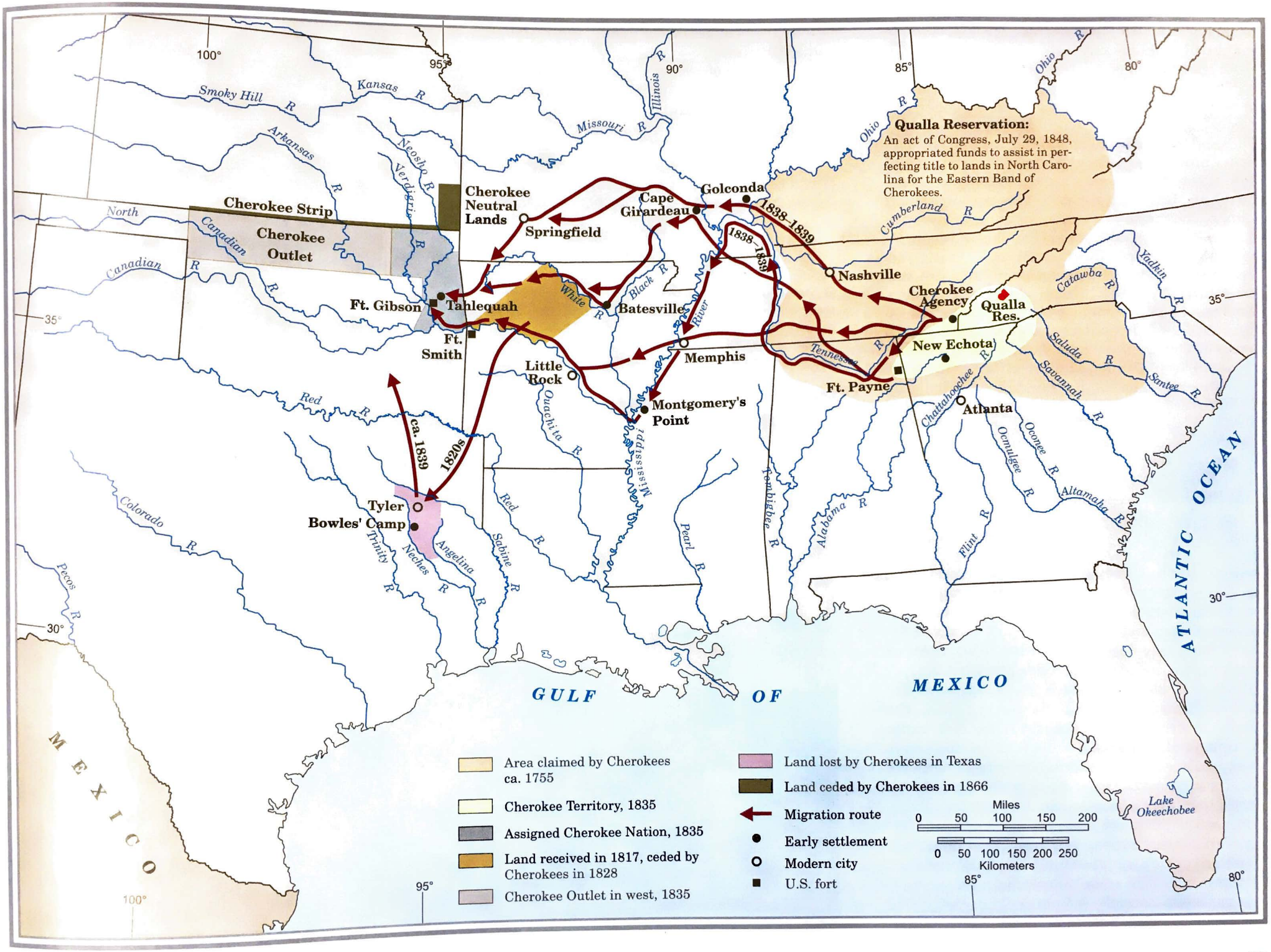
After an initial exploration by English Virginians in the mid-seventeenth century, ongoing contacts were mainly motivated by economics. By the middle of the eighteenth century, a thriving trade had grown in which Cherokees exchanged deerskins for goods of English manufacture, especially cloth, metal implements, and guns. This trade, along with a parallel trade in Indian war captives sold in the South Carolina slave markets, left little of Cherokee culture untouched. Desire for trade goods heightened the emphasis on hunting deer, which involved increasing numbers of hunters for longer periods of time. Transformed into professional hunters for the market, Cherokee men used the full extent of their territory in search of ever-shrinking deer herds.

This rapidly expanding trade economy, accompanied by growing dependence on manufactured goods, involved the Cherokees in the "Great Wars of Empire" between the French and British. The rush westward by English colonists following the French defeat in the last of these wars (known as the French and Indian War or the Seven Years' War) made deep inroads into Cherokee country. Flushed by their victory over the French and condemning western Indians as enemies and worse, the governments of the southern colonies put heavy pressure on the Cherokees to sell their lands and make way for settlements. Between 1755 and 1777, the Cherokees gave up nearly seventy thousand square miles of their northern and eastern lands, about three-fourths of their total holdings. These sales, engineered by representatives of the English Crown or the colonial legislatures, were made under duress by Cherokee leaders who had been either defeated in battle or convinced by threats that they could not preserve their national domain intact. Cherokee attacks on their aggressively expansionist Carolina neighbors during the American Revolution cost them additional land on their eastern and northern borders.

The 1790s was a critical decade in Cherokee history. The deerskin trade was virtually dead (the result of decimated deer herds and changing markets), and economic hardship was everywhere. Invading armies had destroyed dozens of towns, forcing a southwestward shift of the core population area. In addition, the Cherokees began to have formal relations with the United States. Federal Indian policy sought to achieve two goals: acquisition of land for U.S. citizens and wholesale cultural change of American Indians to make them more like white Americans. The last purpose was rooted in the idea that if Indians became family farmers on privately owned parcels of land and attached to the marketplace, they would fit into American society and would readily surrender the vast amounts of land held in common as national domains by the many tribes. Neither assumption was correct; in fact, federal Indian policy became committed to simply banishing Indians to lands somewhere in the West.

Small groups of Cherokees began to move westward as early as 1782. Better hunting opportunities motivated some, but many hoped to escape proximity to white settlers. By 1794, The Bowl had established a small Cherokee community on the St. Francis River in present-day Arkansas. The economic crisis of the 1790s also probably caused other Cherokees to migrate. By 1817, the Western Cherokee population was large enough to demand attention. In a treaty of that year, the Cherokee Nation received, in part as compensation for cessions in the East, a tract for the Western Cherokees between the White and Arkansas rivers. This grant conflicted with the aspirations of Arkansas Territory, organized in 1819, and led to a treaty in 1828 that exchanged the land in Arkansas for a tract to the west in what became Indian Territory. In the meantime, The Bowl and many Western Cherokees, disgusted that the westward expansion of Anglo-Americans had caught up with them, moved south into Texas to escape. But Anglo-Americans caught them again, and in 1839 an army of the Republic of Texas drove most of the Texas band north across the Red River.

In the East, the unremitting demands of the people and governments of Georgia and Tennessee for all the lands of the Cherokees created an atmosphere of tension and anxiety. Following a cession in 1819, the Cherokees utterly rejected further attempts by federal commissioners to acquire more land. Furthermore, a segment of publicity-conscious Cherokee leaders launched a political revolution designed to reflect the cultural changes that had already occurred and to convince Anglo-Americans that it would be inhumane to expel them from their homeland. Many Cherokees were members of Christian churches. Large numbers were involved in the agricultural market economy of the Southeast, and some owned slaves and grew cotton on their plantations. Cherokee children attended school and learned English, and large numbers of adults learned to read and write in their own language, thanks to the brilliant work of Sequoyah in devising the Cherokee syllabary. These and other changes had, in a quarter century, dramatically transformed the Cherokee Nation. Then, in 1827, a special committee chaired by John Ross drafted a constitution. Patterned after that of the United States, the Cherokee constitution formalized the sovereign independence of the


Qualla Reservation:
An act of Congress, July 29, 1848, appropriated funds to assist in perfecting title to lands in North Carolina for the Eastern Band of Cherokees.
Cherokee Strip
Cherokee Outlet
Cherokee Neutral Lands
Springfield
Cape Girardeau
Golconda
1838–1839
Nashville
Cherokee Agency
Qualla Res.
New Echota
Ft. Payne
Atlanta
Ft. Gibson
Tahlequah
Ft. Smith
Batesville
Memphis
Little Rock
Montgomery's Point
Tyler
Bowles' Camp
ca. 1839
1820s
Smoky Hill R
Kansas R
Arkansas R
Neosho R
Verdigris R
Missouri R
Illinois R
Ohio R
Cumberland R
Tennessee R
Catawba R
Yadkin R
Saluda R
Santee R
Savannah R
Chattahoochee R
Ocmulgee R
Oconee R
Altamaha R
Alabama R
Tombigbee R
Flint R
Pearl R
Mississippi R
Ouachita R
Red R
Sabine R
Angelina R
Neches R
Trinity R
Colorado R
Pecos R
Canadian R
North Canadian R
White R
Black R
River
GULF OF MEXICO
ATLANTIC OCEAN
Lake Okeechobee
MEXICO
Area claimed by Cherokees ca. 1755
Cherokee Territory, 1835
Assigned Cherokee Nation, 1835
Land received in 1817, ceded by Cherokees in 1828
Cherokee Outlet in west, 1835
Land lost by Cherokees in Texas
Land ceded by Cherokees in 1866
Migration route
Early settlement
Modern city
U.S. fort
Miles
0 50 100 150 200
0 50 100 150 200 250
Kilometers
100°
95°
90°
85°
80°
35°
30°