

A TRIP TO THE CHEROKEE NATION EAST

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The simple act of reading accomplishes many goals for one's sense of history. After all, traveling back into time doesn't seem like much of an option. But after years of reading about the trials and tribulations of the great Cherokee Nation, I wondered if the text would gain any importance if I visited those old sites where our ancestors became forever enshrined in the pages of history. Thus, the task was set. I would journey back to the old Cherokee lands in Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee to see where our past remains and our future was sealed. At 5:00 on a summer morning, my father and I pulled out of the driveway. Sunrise brought the views of Fort Smith. Noon made way for crowded streets in Memphis. Then came the two lane roads of Mississippi. By mid afternoon, we had reached Guntersville, AL, our destination for the day.

Guntersville had its beginnings too early for history to record. Artifacts have been found there that certainly predate the Cherokee. In more recent times, a trading post was opened on the kusa-nunnahi, the Creek Path, where it intersected the Tennessee River. This post was known as Gunter's Landing for John Gunter, a Welsh trader who married a Cherokee named Ghigoneli and had several mixed blood children who later rose to leadership positions within the Nation, especially during Removal. There must literally be thousands of Cherokee Gunter descendants in Eastern Oklahoma, myself included. My first stop in Guntersville was at the historical museum. There we met Sonny Lewis, a volunteer for the historical society. Sonny took us to the sites where John and Ghigoneli Gunter are believed to be buried and where Edward Gunter lived and operated a ferry before removal. Today, Guntersville is a thriving resort community situated on a peninsula in Guntersville Lake, built in 1939 by the TVA. Guntersville is proud of its Cherokee beginnings, and two recently commissioned portraits of John Gunter and his wife hang in city hall.

The second day of the excursion brought a quick photo opportunity with the Guntersville mayor for the local newspaper followed by departure for the old sites in North Georgia. After crossing over Lookout Mountain, we arrived in Rome, GA at noon. The area around Rome was known as Vann's Valley before removal. Along the Oostanala River in the heart of Rome is the site where Major Ridge lived and operated a ferry. The location is now home to the Chieftain's Museum. Twenty miles northeast of Rome is New Echota, the Capital of the Cherokee Nation from 1825 to 1832. New Echota consists of both the original

townsite and a well kept museum accurately describing the atrocities committed by the State of Georgia and white settlers against the Cherokee prior to Removal. On the site remains the original cornerstones of Elias Boudinot's home in which the forever debatable Treaty of New Echota was signed, ceding all Cherokee lands east of the Mississippi. From New Echota we travelled northward to the Vann House in Spring Place, the old home of Chief James Vann. Vann was a mixed blood chief who typified the plantation owning Cherokees of that era. He was slave owning and wealthy, possessing amenities that could only be found in a Southern mansion. It is said that James Vann was liked by few, and he was killed by blood law in 1809. Vann's son Joe occupied the home until he was forced from it in 1835. The State of Georgia maintains both New Echota and the Vann House, and both are well kept and historically sound.

With the day winding down, we stopped at Red Clay, a historical site operated by the State of Tennessee just north of Cohutta, GA. By this time, rain had started falling upon the last council ground of the Cherokee Nation prior to Removal, just as it had done when the final council was held there in 1837. Not much has changed at Red Clay in 150 years. The council grounds are apparent even today, nestled between groves of trees. The great council spring still flows with its clear blue water, and I couldn't help but imagine our leaders of the past gathered around it. Ever since the reunion of the Cherokee Nation on the council ground in 1984, the eternal fire has kept watch over Red Clay. As I left Red Clay, I felt a bit of sadness to think that our proud ancestral home ended with the adjournment of that final council so long ago.

Dusk quickly captured the southern end of the Smoky Mountains as we raced through southeastern Tennessee and western North Carolina on the road to Cherokee. Up the Ocoee River we drove, skirting along the base of the Snowbird Mountains. Cherokees still live high in the Snowbird, and it is thought to be the highest concentration of fullblood Cherokee left today. Then came the Nantahala River, a corruption of the Cherokee word for "midday sun." It doesn't take much to imagine peaks so high and trees so dense that the sun only shines when it is overhead. Before long, we were nearly in Cherokee. It was now dark, but I didn't need any light to see where the ancient town of Kituhwa once flourished along the Oconaluftee near Birdtown. Winding around a few more miles of mountainous road and dodging a few more tourists brought us into Cherokee, our destination for the night.

Day three was packed with many things to do, so its start came early. Fog had settled into the valley where the Oconaluftee meets Soco Creek I promptly headed to the Museum of the Cherokee Indian when it opened at 9 am. Before proceeding through the museum, visitors are asked to watch a short video on how the world came to be. Once the story ended, the exhibits were waiting. The museum is an incredible tribute to the Cherokee people. From prehistoric Cherokee artifacts to 17th century tools to the turmoil of Removal, the museum is

a complete representation of Cherokee past and present. The museum recently underwent a \$3.5 million renovation, and it hosts over 125,000 paid visitors annually. One important note is that the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, along with both New Echota and the Vann House in Georgia, do not charge recognized members of the Cherokee Nation admission. Additionally, the Museum of the Cherokee Indian allows one guest at no charge. After touring the museum, Nina Anderson, Museum Director of Marketing and Public Relations, walked us to the tribal complex, where I met Robert Bushyhead and Ruby Bark. Both are employed in the Cultural Center and are immersed in the intense task of preserving the Kituhwan dialect of the Cherokee language. The Eastern Band is involved in preservation of the dialect so that it can be taught in their schools. Aside from the linguistic work, I asked Bushyhead about the current state of the Eastern Band. "We have about 11,000 members," he said. "Our rolls are closed—you have to be born into the tribe." Estimates are that fewer than 1,000 fullbloods remain in the Eastern Band. The Eastern Band gains revenue in part by assessing businesses a 6% levy on local businesses, of which a large part are tourist souvenir stores. The focus of the current Eastern Band administration is one of cultural preservation. The people of Cherokee are fairly distinct from the "Oklahoma Cherokees" as we are called, mostly as a result of several generations of separation. Cherokee itself is thriving off of the tourist dollar.

The day was half gone now, and we raced out of the mountains toward the foothills of Tennessee. I wanted to see where the great towns of Chota, Tanasi, Tellico, and the other Overhill Towns once stood, for my ancestors were largely from here. Anticipation grew for this final significant leg of the journey. Thoughts of Old Hop, Attacullaculla, Oconostota, and Old Tassel entered my head as I peered down on the rolling hills from high atop Chillowee Mountain. As we passed Tallassee, I wondered how many great Cherokees had traversed along the Little Tennessee, to and from the Middle Towns. Before long, we were there. First the Tellico Blockhouse, and then Fort Loudoun--remnants of the white interaction with the Overhill Towns. Both are preserved by the State of Tennessee. It was Fort Loudoun, some 225 years ago, that was destroyed and 26 of its men killed after the deaths of a similar number of Cherokee in ongoing skirmishes with the British. Fort Loudoun housed the likes of interpreter William Shorey, the grandfather of Chief John Ross, and Captain John Stuart, a Scotsman saved and adopted by Attacullaculla. Outside the front gate of Fort Loudoun once sat the town of Tuskegee. It was the birthplace of Sequoyah. Appropriately, a museum dedicated to Sequoyah and the Overhill Towns, called the Sequoyah Birthplace Museum, is near the former settlement. The exact sites of Tuskegee, Chota, and the other Overhill Towns are now under water, thanks to the TVA's Tellico Lake, built some 30 years ago. So, on the water's edge near old Tuskegee sits the Sequoyah Birthplace Museum, an Eastern Band funded institution that is under the direction of Russell Townsend. Townsend is a Cherokee from Tulsa who graduated from the University of Tulsa and is currently a doctoral candidate in archaeology at the University of Tennessee. His parents were originally from

Elwood in rural Adair County. Townsend says that over 100,000 persons visit the Sequoyah Birthplace Museum annually. Perhaps the most precious treasure of the museum are the artifacts taken from the Overhill Towns before they were flooded. Examples of tools and pottery are common. Behind the museum stands a common mound burial of skeletons found by the TVA during construction.

The whirlwind tour of the past was nearly over. Only two sites remained on my schedule of places to visit. They were the memorials of Chota and Tanasi, the latter being the namesake of Tennessee. It was here, on the secluded banks of Tellico Lake some 10 miles below Fort Loudoun, where the great chiefs led the Cherokee Nation during turbulence with colonists before the American Revolution. Old Hop and his nephew Attacullaculla, the Little Carpenter; Oconostota, the Great Warrior; Old Tassel, the Great Orator—this was their home. Tanasi and Chota were both on the south bank of the Little Tennessee. The hills aren't overly huge here. Even though the Tennessee lands were ceded well before removal, many adults who were only children when their Overhill homes were lost must have been moved by the striking similarity of the Grand River below Spavinaw Creek or the Illinois River below Watts after they removed to Oklahoma. Tanasi and Chota were separate towns at first, but Chota eventually overtook Tanasi. They were only a few hundred yards apart. The monument at Chota isn't easily accessible, but the walk was certainly worthwhile. Its tribute stands at the end of a small trail surrounded by brush, perhaps a quarter mile from where vehicles can go no further. Isn't it a sight, though. Seven large columns, each representing a clan, face the lake where the Little Tennessee must have made its way past the old town. In front of the monument is a grave stone, of recent origin, that reads "Oconostota--Great Cherokee Warrior." I looked to the east as I was remembering Chota, and there was Chillowee Mountain. It must have been 40 miles away, but it still towered. The ancient towns were on the other side, a world away. Well to the east, over and past Chillowee Mountain, were the Middle Towns. Perhaps they seemed like a different people. Perhaps not. As I was leaving Chota, the distant rumble of thunder could be heard. It was sunny, however—no storm was visible. Maybe there was a storm somewhere in the distant mountains, or maybe it was the tattoo of a long forgotten drum.

In three days I had passed through the lands that was once home to the proud Cherokee Nation. It was a Nation who answered to no one but itself and the Great Spirit. Aside from the Eastern Band, it is possible that a trace of the Cherokee people does exist in the old homelands—most there claim to be Cherokee. Who am I to say whether or not they are Cherokee. What I do know is that, while we may be decades departed from those old lands, the Cherokee Indian retains a presence in the Southeast. Our dead are buried there and our names resonate to this day. The Cherokee can be scorned, maltreated, and driven from their homes, but their spirit will always remain in those hills.