The Journey on the Trail of Tears

Before the Europeans came to the American continents, it is estimated that over ten million Native Americans lived in North America. Within 300 years, 90% of them had died due to disease and war. When the American colonies began to develop and their populations rose, Native American tribes were forced from their homelands.

Since the late 1700’s, the Cherokee nation had signed treaties with the national government protecting their lands. The Cherokee also tried to adapt to the “American” way of living. They had their own constitution, newspaper, and written language. The issue of who has the right to the land would come to a head in 1828 between the Cherokee and the state of Georgia. Georgia refused to recognize the treaties between the United States and the Cherokee nation.

The national government passed the Indian Removal Act in 1830 which allowed the federal government to pay various tribes money for their land. The Cherokee refused to move. They insisted that the treaties that had been signed forty years earlier gave them ownership of the land. In 1832, the Cherokee sued the state of Georgia. The case made its way to the Supreme Court, led by Chief Justice John Marshall. In the case Worchester v. Georgia, the Supreme Court supported the Cherokee stating that Georgia could not force the Cherokee off of their lands. President Andrew Jackson, however, supported Georgia. “John Marshall has made his decision. Now let him enforce it.”

In 1838 U.S. General Winfield Scott and 7000 troops surrounded the Cherokee and threatened war if they did not leave the lands. Congress had set up present-day Oklahoma as Indian Territory. It was there that the Cherokee had to move to. The journey from their homeland to the territory was known to the Cherokee as “nun a hî dun a tla hî lu î”, or the “Trail Where They Cried”. The Cherokee were faced with harsh weather conditions, sickness, and starvation.

By the time the Cherokee had arrived in Oklahoma in 1839, over 3000 had died. Some estimates went as high as 4000, or nearly one-fifth of the entire Cherokee Nation. By 1840, all of the tribes east of the Mississippi River had been moved or killed.