Tracing history on the

Trail of Tears

Atrocity also illustrates lessons of resilience, unity

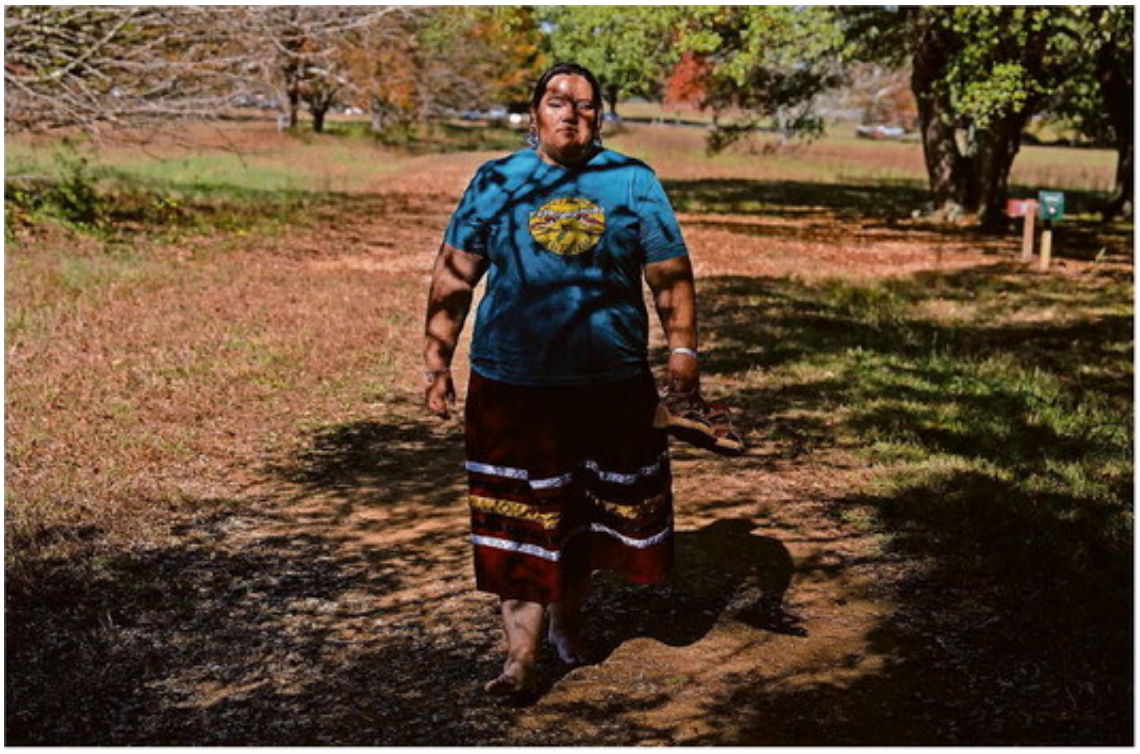
Keith Sharon Nashville Tennessean | USA TODAY NETWORK – TENNESSEE NEW ECHOTA, GA — Horror lingers in the knotted sweet gum and bent magnolia trees.

To stand here is to feel shock, cruelty and despair emanating from the red clay of north Georgia. Blood is as much a part of this landscape as the honeysuckle reeds.

This site, the former capital of the Cherokee Nation, sits in a green valley carved by the confluence of Georgia's Coosawattee and Conasauga rivers.

Traveling through this part of the southeastern United States requires passing over land and water routes that have long been labeled the Trail of Tears.

Even today, people along its path are shaped by the trail, including a singer in a Cherokee choir who said that she, merely by existing, is "the answer to



Dawnenna West, who is Cherokee, weeps for her ancestors as she walks at the New Echota State Historic Site in Calhoun, Georgia, where where the Trail of Tears officially began. PHOTOS BY NICOLE HESTER/NASHVILLE TENNESSEAN



The Trail of Tears describes the forced removal of Indigenous people from the land their ancestors had called home.

an ancient prayer."

The descendants of those forced to walk the trail talk about the pain they feel seeing present-day government agents detaining people of color at gunpoint and banishing them to another land.

But the inhumanity this historic trail commemorates stands in stark contrast with the enduring human spirit.

On this part of the map, a string of museums, historic markers, burial grounds and broken stone foundations connect — all preserved so America doesn't forget the atrocities that happened along these routes.

And everywhere, there is Andrew Jackson, the former U.S. president and architect of the walking genocide. There are banks named for Jackson and parks and high schools and roads and cities — in a place where some Native people alive today were raised to never use $20 bills because Jackson's picture is on them.

The Trail of Tears describes the forced removal of Indigenous people from the land their ancestors had called home long before colonizers from Europe arrived and named the place America. U.S soldiers used guns, bayonets, threats, kidnapping and terror to force five Indigenous tribes —Cherokee, Muscogee, Chickasaw, Seminole and Choctaw — to move west between 1831 and 1903.

An estimated 60,000 people were forcibly removed and about 10,000 died of starvation, exposure, disease and other causes. They drowned, they were run over by wagon wheels, they died in childbirth, or they were killed by U.S. soldiers. Among the Cherokee alone, 1 in 4 people died on the Trail of Tears.

For some, the Trail of Tears isn't just history. Its lessons remain crucial to the stories Americans tells ourselves about our past and our present, and what we want to become.

'You've got to keep persevering, like the Cherokee do'

One of the violent removals began in New Echota on May 26, 1838.

"The solemness fills your heart," said New Echota visitor Janet Foreman-Green, 71, who is a Cherokee citizen. In the 1970s, she worked as a helicopter mechanic for the U.S. military in Vietnam. "It's a place full of sorrow because of the way things were done, the way people were treated."

She comes to New Echota as much as she can, rolling an oxygen tank behind her. Foreman-Green's time is limited because she has chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. Five of her ancestors were forced to walk the Trail of Tears.

“By the grace of God,” she said. “You’ve got to keep persevering, like the Cherokee do. We’re warrior women. You don’t hold us down.”

There were once 36 wooden structures in New Echota, including homes, a tavern, a courthouse and a newspaper office. The Cherokee Phoenix was printed there in both English and the Cherokee language, with oil-based ink darkened by lampblack.

The U.S. government, led by Jackson, wanted that land. They wanted the mineral rights, the river access, the abundant resources. Gold had been discovered nearby, and they wanted all of north Georgia on the chance that more gold was just below the surface.

It was the strategy of the soldiers to grab children first, so their parents would more likely comply without a fight. Residents were forced to leave, in some cases, with only the clothes on their backs. Sometimes without blankets for the inevitable winter. Sometimes without food or pots and pans. Sometimes without shoes.

Most of the time without anything to make the 1,000-mile, four-plus-month trip easier.

Like the tongues of a multiheaded snake, the Trail of Tears hissed through Chattanooga, Tennessee, northern Alabama, western North Carolina, middle Tennessee and up through southern Illinois, down through Missouri and across Arkansas before stopping in what is now eastern Oklahoma.

They were forced onto land no one wanted.

‘We almost didn’t make it’

Tahlequah, Oklahoma, is an hour’s drive south of Tulsa in the dusty foothills of the Ozark Mountains. You can eat dinner at a timeless place called Del Rancho, where you order at your table through an old-fashioned telephone.

Everyone recommends the Tahlequah Tacos, in which homemade chili sits atop Indian fry bread.

Less than a mile from the diner, the treaty that allows Native Americans sovereignty over their land is kept under glass in a climate-controlled storage facility.

Today, there are more than 470,000 Cherokee Nation citizens around the world.

“We almost didn’t make it,” said Cherokee Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr. “We made it because we invested in education and democracy. We focused on the things we had in common.”

‘It’s so special to be able to stand in this space’

The water spider, according to Cherokee legend, could flit across the water to retrieve coal that could warm the cold world.

Cheryl Wolfinger makes and sells reed water-spider baskets in New Echota’s re-created tavern.

“We’ve got to make sure that people understand,” Wolfinger said. “That we were here. That we exist.”

A short walk from the tavern, the sound of singing rises from a building that once housed the New Echota Supreme Court.

During our visit earlier this year, the Cherokee Language Repertory Choir of North Carolina sang “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah,” “What Wondrous Love Is This” and “Amazing Grace” in Cherokee, each stanza bouncing along slowly with a deliberate beat.

Singer Dawnenna West finished the performance and walked outside with her grandmother, Maggie Armachain, 76.

Moved by the music, Armachain started crying.

“It’s happy tears, I guess,” she said. “It’s so special to be able to stand in this space,” West said. “It makes me wonder what they were thinking before they were removed.”

The government wanted their land

People in north Georgia called the mansion in Chatsworth “Diamond Hill.” A red-brick edifice with white columns, Diamond Hill once loomed over 800 acres. The lush land in and around the farm was known for its flora — summersweet, viburnum, blueberries and milkweed.

It was a thriving plantation owned by James Vann, who was shot to death in 1809, and then by his son “Rich Joe” Vann. They were a wealthy, prominent Cherokee family who enslaved more than 100 people.

(Estimates put the number of people enslaved by the Cherokee before emancipation at just less than 600.)

It didn’t matter how rich the Vanns were.

It didn’t matter who in the house was enslaved.

The U.S. government soldiers forced everyone on the Vann property to walk the Trail of Tears.

“There was a big demand for this land,” said David Gomez, a ranger who oversees the Vann House. “Hundreds of tracts of Cherokee land were lost by force.”

Today, the Vann House is a museum with the second floor dedicated to the plight of the enslaved Africans who worked and lived there. As history turned over time, the enslaved people who worked Cherokee farms became known as “Freedmen,”and they are considered citizens of the Cherokee Nation.

‘You need to know the bad history so you don’t repeat it’

Ike Moore parks his Harley-Davidson Screamin’ Eagle 110 outside Shorty’s, a market/restaurant in Hollywood, Alabama, where the floor creaks and the building rattles when the freight train passes.

Moore is 72 now, with 22 years of Trail of Tears patches on his leather vest, confirming his journeys.

He’s talking about elementary school.

“Our teacher put it in a way that still breaks my heart,” Moore said, wiping tears from his eyes. “The armed soldiers come and take you away from your home.

“It moves me that one human being can do another human being that way.”

Every year, as many as 10,000 motorcycle riders vroom from the Ross’ Landing memorial site outside Chattanooga on Highway 72 to Waterloo, Alabama. Moore is the president of the Alabama-Tennessee

Corridor of the Trail of Tears Commemorative Motorcycle Ride.

Moore is not Cherokee in his blood, but he is in his heart. He won't keep his money in the local Andrew Jackson bank.

"I think about what he done," Moore said. "And I don't have any use for him."

Moore wants everyone to know he and his wife, Trisha, are not hippies. They are not Hell's Angels.

"We're Baptists," he said. He tries to keep politics out of his discussions about the trail. "You need to know the bad history so you don't repeat it," he said.

Every time Moore makes the Trail of Tears ride, he has one dream.

"My hope is some little kid is going to ask, 'Why are all these motorcycles here?'" Moore said, so he can retell the story. "Then our mission is complete."

A town anchored by hope

It is just more than 700 miles from New Echota to Tahlequah, Oklahoma, on today's highways.

In the 1800s, the Indigenous hostages and enslaved people were forced to walk the journey, many of them zigzagging farther up to Illinois and down through Mississippi.

Tahlequah today seems like it is a



Cheryl Wolfinger weaves baskets at the New Echota State Historic Site in Calhoun, Georgia. The historic site is recognized as where the Trail of Tears officially began. PHOTOS BY NICOLE HESTER/NASHVILLE TENNESSEAN



“We made it because we invested in education and democracy. We focused on the things we had in common,” says Chuck Hoskin Jr., principal chief of the Cherokee Nation, of the tribe’s resilience.

million years from the tragic end of the Trail of Tears.

There are a couple of museums dedicated to the Trail of Tears and its heroic survivors as well as historic markers highlighting the end of the trail. There are seemingly constant battles over land rights with the state of Oklahoma and varying interpretations of criminal and civil law.

But Tahlequah is a town anchored by hope.

There is Northeastern State University, where about a quarter of the students identify as Native American. There is the Northeastern Health System, with a new $400 million addition that will be part of a gleaming campus.

There is the former Cherokee Casino, which has been converted into the Durbin Feeling Language Center, an immersion program where all the signage and the lessons are in Cherokee.

The Cherokee Nation today derives about 40% of its income from casinos, down from 80% or 90% about 20 years ago.

One of the stars of Tahlequah today is Hannah Neugin, 20, named Miss Cherokee for the Cherokee Nation of 2025. She is the descendant of Rebecca Ketcher Neugin, once the oldest living Cherokee who had survived the Trail of Tears. Rebecca Ketcher Neugin died at 97 in 1932.

“I’m truly inspired by her,” Hannah Neugin said. “She carried such a strength with her.”

Neugin is a student at Northeastern State and played a homemade flute in the Miss Cherokee talent competition. She played a haunting song called “Orphan Child,” which had been sung by Cherokee while they were on the Trail of Tears.

She sees parallels with what happened to her family and modern-day immigration raids.

“It does remind me of what our ancestors endured,” she said. “We need to make a change before something irreversible happens.”

Neugin made the 950-mile Trail of Tears ride by bicycle, but says she would never do it again.

“It was triggered,” she said. “It was mentally exhausting. These places are very hard to visit, knowing people died where you’re standing.

There is a deeper lesson about the Trail of Tears, said Hoskin, the principal chief.

He learned the superficial story when he saw a mural depicting the Trail of Tears on the wall at his local post office. He learned about “dispossession, oppression, sorrow and loss.” That’s the surface.

‘When they were knocked down, they got back up’

“Rebirth and renewal are even more important lessons,” Hoskin said. “We don’t want the country to forget. We were stripped of our rights. But when they were knocked down, they got back up.”

The word he clings to today is “resilient.”

“We turned our anger into educating people,” Hoskin said.

He is concerned, just like Neugin, about the current policies of the U.S. government. During the first Trump administration, he saw a painful callback to the Trail of Tears.

“Children in cages reminded me of the proximity of harm,” Hoskin said. “Solving problems by caging people never works.”

What will work for all democracies, Hoskin said, is unification.

At the end of the Trail of Tears, the Indigenous leaders who had signed the removal treaty with Americans were killed by Cherokee.

“We were at each other’s throats,” Hoskin said. “Our ancestors could have given in to those differences.”



Ike Moore, president of the Alabama-Tennessee Corridor of the Trail of Tears Commemorative Motorcycle Ride, is 72 now, with 22 years of Trail of Tears patches on his leather vest. NICOLE HESTER/NASHVILLE TENNESSEAN

© 2016 www.democratandchronicle.com. All rights reserved. Powered by TECNAVIA