**Culture in Transition: The Cherokee in Middle Tennessee**

**Tues. March 29 through Tuesday May 3,**

**11.00 AM – 12.15 Tuesdays**

**The Temple**

**5015 Harding Pike**

**Nashville, TN**

**Pat Cummins, Cherokee Historian**

**(615) 926-2406**

**E-mail:** [**pat@nativehistoryassociation.org**](mailto:pat@nativehistoryassociation.org)

**Handout # 1**

**Page 1 of 3**

**Introduction**

Cherokee Indians once occupied an area encompassing approximately 140,000 square miles that became parts of North Carolina, Tennessee, South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama. The Cherokee thrived in North Carolina well into the late eighteenth century, but as Euro-American settlers steadily moved into and near Cherokee lands, sharp conflicts arose between Cherokees and whites and between Cherokees themselves, as leaders with competing claims to speak for the tribe secured treaties and formed other agreements with white settlers that were not acknowledged by all Cherokee people. In 1838-39, the U.S. government forcibly removed the Cherokee from their lands in North Carolina, leading them on the infamous Trail of Tears to the Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma). A small number of Cherokee people successfully resisted removal, however, by claiming North Carolina citizenship and by maintaining the right to remain on lands they owned. These people and their descendants were recognized in 1868 by the federal government as the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. In the early 2000s these Cherokee, living on the Qualla Boundary in the western part of the state, were the only Indian tribe in North Carolina fully recognized by the federal government. The tribe has more than 13,000 enrolled members but less than 500 of those persons are considered to be full bloods or 4/4 Cherokee by tribal enrollment standards. A minimum documented 1/16 Cherokee blood quantum is required for enrollment in the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, while a documented 1/32 degree blood quantum is required for enrollment in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma.

**1.**

**Cherokee Origins and First European Contact**

The Cherokee, members of the Iroquoian language group, are descended from the native peoples who occupied the southern Appalachian Mountains beginning in approximately 8000 B.C. By 1500 B.C., a distinct Cherokee language had developed, and by 1000 A.D. the Cherokee were living a Woodland lifestyle with unique cultural characteristics influenced by Mississippian religious traditions. The growing and harvesting of corn, or selu, beans, and squash—the Cherokee "three sisters"—were ascribed deep spiritual significance, as were other occupations, including hunting, the care and cleaning of homes, the gathering of other essential foods, games, dances, and religious ceremonies. The central philosophy of duyuktv, meaning "the right way," prescribed that the Cherokee attempt to obtain harmony and balance in every aspect of their lives, particularly with respect to the natural world. Communal responsibility and sacrifice were essential to the Cherokee vision of life, as symbolized by the central plaza—used for public ceremonies—and the council house, or town house, which held the "sacred fire," embodying the spiritual essence of the town. Besides food, the environment provided all that the people needed, including medicine, clothing, weapons, shelter, musical instruments, and personal adornments. The governing of Cherokee towns was through democratic consensus as well as the leadership of priests, war chiefs, and peace chiefs. Familial ties and clan affiliations came through Cherokee women, who owned the houses and fields and passed them on to their daughters.

Although initial contact took place during Hernando De Soto's expedition in 1540, sustained relations between Europeans and the Cherokee were not established until the late seventeenth century by traders from Virginia and South Carolina. During the seventeenth century, Cherokees living in what became North Carolina were distributed among the "Middle Towns" along the Little Tennessee River, the "Valley Towns" along the Hiwassee and Valley Rivers, and the "Out Towns" on the Tuckasegee and Oconaluftee Rivers. As British and French colonial aspirations began to clash, the Cherokee became increasingly important as a buffer and continued to alternate alliances between the two nations. In 1730 Alexander Cuming took seven Cherokees to England, reinforcing Cherokee alliances with the English that had been established through a treaty signed at the Town of Neguassee. The increasing pressure of European expansion, and the subsequent loss of much of their territory, led the Cherokee to initiate hostilities as the French and Indian War (1754-63) progressed. Virginian hostility toward the Cherokee led to the Cherokee War of 1760-61, a war in which the tribe suffered extensive losses.

**2.**

**Disease, Destruction, and the Loss of Cherokee Land**

Smallpox and other diseases brought by Europeans and enslaved Africans were more devastating to the Cherokee and other southeastern Indians than war. Since the Indians did not have the immune system the Europeans had built up after centuries of contact with these diseases, simple contact could set off an epidemic. Cherokee people were exposed to smallpox for a period spanning over three centuries. Probably their first exposure was in 1698, when a smallpox epidemic decreased their population measurably. In 1738-39 the tribe experienced its worst epidemic from smallpox, when the disease was brought by traders or was brought back from an expedition in which the Cherokee aided the British against the Spanish in Florida. Between 7,000 and 10,000 Cherokees died, representing about one-half of the tribe's population. Since medicine men were unable to provide a cure, the Cherokee tried a traditional method of purification—sweat houses followed by plunging into icy streams. This practice only added to the number who died. Others who survived the disease were horror stricken by their disfigurement and killed themselves rather than live in disgrace.

In addition to population losses, the 1738-39 epidemic had other consequences for the Cherokee. Towns were relocated, Cherokee distrust of the English increased, and the French gained a foothold among the tribe. The epidemic also brought a deterioration of Cherokee culture by challenging religious beliefs, almost destroying the medicine man's perceived power. Smallpox struck the Cherokee people again in 1759-60 during the French and Indian War.

Although the Cherokee first made land cessions to Europeans in 1721 and 1755, British victory in the French and Indian War in 1763 ended the need for the tribe as a buffer and brought increasing pressure of colonial expansion. Although the Proclamation Line of 1763 officially prohibited white settlers from entering Indian Territory. White encroachment on Cherokee lands continued after the establishment of the line. The years 1768, 1770, 1773, and 1775 saw a series of "voluntary" land cessions made by the Cherokee. The 1775 cession, led by land speculator Judge Richard Henderson,involved most of the upper half of Cherokee hunting grounds and included most of what is modern-day Kentucky. In all during this period, the Cherokee people ceded almost 50,000 square miles of land.

**3.**

**Culture in Transition: The Cherokee in Middle Tennessee**

**The Revolutionary War, Cherokee Defeat, and Additional Land Cessions**

**Handout # 2**

When the Revolutionary War erupted in 1775, John Stuart, British superintendent of the South, planned to use Indian tribes in conjunction with English troops against the colonists. White encroachers at the Tennessee-North Carolina border along the Watauga, Nolichucky, and Holston Rivers, as well as a delegation of Shawnee and other northern Indians urging the Cherokee to fight against the Americans, inspired their decision to aid the British. The Upper Cherokee planned a three-pronged attack on the intruders along the North Carolina and Virginia frontiers. The Cherokee Middle Towns were to attack North Carolina, while the Lower Towns were to attack South Carolina and Georgia. The Lower and Middle settlements met with limited success. In reaction to these attacks, Gen. Charles Lee, commander of the southern Continental forces, urged a joint punitive expedition, known as the Cherokee Campaign of 1776. Under Col. Andrew Williamson, South Carolina troops moved against the Lower Towns and then traveled northwest to join the North Carolina forces under Gen. Griffith Rutherford in devastating the Middle and Valley Towns. Virginia troops under Col. William Christian crushed the Overhill Towns in present-day Tennessee. More than 50 Cherokee towns were destroyed in the summer of 1776, and the survivors were left without food or shelter.

These attacks devastated the Cherokee people, who sued for peace, giving up huge parcels of land in the process.

**Culture in Transition: The Cherokee in Middle Tennessee**

**Treaties & Land Cessions**

**Handout #3**

While the American Revolution brought independence to white North Carolinians, the region's Indians, including the Cherokee, were a conquered people. Nevertheless, the Cherokee managed to maintain a semblance of political independence and cultural integrity despite military defeat. With the Treaty of Holston (1791), the United States initiated a "civilization" program aimed at assimilating the Cherokee people into the mainstream of American society. To a great extent this meant the adoption of sedentary agriculture. Consequently, with Indians living by means of farming, their huge hunting grounds would no longer be needed and whites could easily acquire more Cherokee land. The Tellico Treaty was signed in 1798 as a result of the movement of settlers into Cherokee territory in western North Carolina, west of the 1791 Holston Treaty line. The Tellico Treaty specified that a line, called the Meigs-Freeman Line, was to be drawn from the "Great Iron" or "Smokey" mountain in a southeasterly direction so as to exclude settlers from Cherokee territory.

Within their newly established boundaries, the Cherokee took the lead in adopting Euro-American ways in the early nineteenth century, establishing schools and a bicameral tribal legislature. In the 1820s, the Cherokee Sequoyah invented a syllabary that enabled his people to read and write in their own language, and a bilingual newspaper, the Cherokee Phoenix, soon began publication. Cherokee men and women took up farming of cotton, flax, and livestock, and engaged widely in trade with whites. Some Cherokees even built columned plantation houses and bought slaves. Historians have referred to this period of recovery as the "Cherokee renaissance." Despite the successes of this period, which saw the Cherokee willingly embrace white culture, seeds were also planted for a new and even greater crisis for the Cherokee people. In an attempt to save land that had been lost after the Creek War of 1813, the Cherokee signed two more treaties in 1817 and 1819.

The treaties proposed exchanging Cherokee lands in the Southeast for territory west of the Mississippi River. The government promised assistance in resettling those Cherokees who chose to remove, and approximately 1,500-2,000 did. The Treaty of 1817 also contained a proposal for an experiment in Cherokee citizenship. Cherokees who wished to remain on ceded land in the East could apply for a 640-acre reserve and legal rights as American citizens.

**Culture in Transition: The Cherokee in Middle Tennessee**

**Cherokee Resistance**

**Handout # 4**

**The treaties signed after the Cherokee Campaign of 1776 marked the first forced land cessions by the Cherokee, and for the first time the land ceded was not unsettled hunting grounds but the sites of some of the tribe's oldest towns, in which the Cherokee people had lived for centuries. The Cherokee Campaign of 1776 also caused a rift between the old chiefs and young warriors. Many of the latter withdrew to Tennessee and northern Alabama, where they became known as the Chickamauga Cherokee and continued to fight white Americans until 1794.**

**Culture in Transition: The Cherokee in Middle Tennessee**

**The Trail of Tears and the Creation of the Eastern Band of Cherokees**

**Handout #5**

In 1819 the remaining Cherokees who opposed removal negotiated still another treaty. During the period from 1783 to 1819, the Cherokee people had lost an additional 69 percent of their remaining land. Although the tribe ceded almost 4 million acres by the 1819 treaty, they hoped that this additional cession would end any further removal effort. In fact, the Cherokee National Council agreed that they would not enter into any more negotiations involving the giving up of "even one foot of land." The continuing westward movement of North Carolina settlers usually brought whites into conflict with Indians, however, especially those on whose land gold was discovered in 1828. These whites were reaching into lands that treaties supposedly had guaranteed to the Cherokee. Yet instead of enforcing the treaties, the U.S. government—with President Andrew Jackson leading the way—decided to relocate the Cherokee people.

In 1830 Congress passed the Indian Removal Act, setting the stage for the forced removal of the Cherokee and the infamous Trail of Tears. In 1835, a small, unauthorized group of about 100 Cherokee leaders (known as the Treaty Party) signed the Treaty of New Echota (Georgia), giving away all remaining Cherokee territory in the Southeast in exchange for land in northeastern Oklahoma. Principal Cherokee Chief John Ross collected more than 15,000 signatures, representing almost the entire Cherokee Nation, on a petition requesting the U.S. Senate to withhold ratification of this illicit treaty. The Senate, however, approved the treaty by a margin of one vote in 1836. The treaty gave the Cherokee people two years to vacate their mountain homeland and go west to Oklahoma.

By May 1838, few Cherokees were prepared to move, so President Martin Van Buren, who had succeeded Jackson in 1837, dispatched federal soldiers commanded by Gen. Winfield Scott to round up Cherokees in North Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama and place them in various internment camps and stockades. The horrible conditions facing his people at these poorly planned facilities led Ross to appeal to the president for a delay in the removal until fall, when water and game would be more plentiful. Van Buren agreed, and between October 1838 and March 1839, the Cherokee moved west. The journey was mismanaged; there was a shortage of supplies; and the troops rushed the Indians onward, refusing to allow them to minister to their sick or bury their dead. Of the approximately 15,000 who began the trek, an estimated 4,000 perished.

Approximately 1000 to 1,500 Cherokees remained in North Carolina, hiding in the mountains. One of their leaders, Tsali, was captured and executed for killing two federal soldiers pursuing him and his family, but some of his followers and other Cherokees (who had possibly aided in Tsali's capture) were allowed to remain. Between removal of the Cherokee Nation in 1838 and the end of the Civil War, many Cherokees gave their money to William Holland Thomas, their agent and later their only white chief, to purchase land for them. Thomas acquired many of the tracts that would make up the modern-day Qualla Boundary, the official name of the Cherokee Indian Reservation in North Carolina. These Cherokees—together with the hundreds who had hidden in the mountains, who already legally owned land through the Treaty of 1817, or who had escaped the Trail of Tears and returned--formed the nucleus of what would become the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

**References: William L. Anderson, Cherokee Removal: Before and After (1991); Barbara R. Duncan and Brett H. Riggs, Cherokee Heritage Trails Guidebook (2003); John Ehle, Trail of Tears: The Rise and Fall of the Cherokee Nation (1988); John R. Finger, The Eastern Band of Cherokee, 1819-1900 (1984); Tom Hartley, The Dividing Paths: Cherokees and South Carolinians through the Era of Revolution (1993); William G. McLaughlin, Cherokee Renascence in the New Republic (1986); James H. O'Donnell III, The Cherokees of North Carolina in the American Revolution (1976); Theda Perdue, The Cherokee (1988); Timothy Silver, A New Face on the Countryside: Indians, Colonists, and Slaves in South Atlantic Forests, 1500-1800 (1990); Russell Thornton, The Cherokees: A Population History (1990).**