

Sequoyah

SEQUOYAH. He was an illiterate genius. Although he was half-white, he spoke no language other than his native Cherokee. However, he realized the importance of literacy and, solely from the resources of his mind, he endowed a whole tribe with learning. He was the only man in history to conceive and perfect in its entirety an alphabet or syllabary.



Sequoyah was a soldier in the War of 1812 and was involved in other military actions during the second decade of the 19th century, but he was always at heart a man of peace and a man of learning. He was among those Cherokees who signed a treaty with Andrew Jackson in 1817 whereby they ceded their lands in the South to the government and agreed to *emigrate* to Arkansas. Chief John Jolly, who had already removed to Arkansas several years before, recruited a large party of his tribesmen to return to Arkansas with him. Among them was Sequoyah. These were the Western Cherokees who were

the first to remove and thereby missed the forced removals and sufferings experienced by the Eastern Cherokees twenty years later.

Sequoyah settled in northwestern Arkansas on the north side of the Arkansas River near the Illinois River. He was removed from the white's world, but he had not forgotten the magic and the importance of the written word. He had begun work on characters or symbols to express the sense and sound of the Cherokee language long before emigrating to the West, perhaps as early as 1809. His work was a slow, laborious undertaking, made much more difficult by the ridicule and obstacles that he encountered. Despite all discouragement and accusations of practicing evil arts, he finally completed his alphabet in about twelve years. In reality, it was a syllabary because, for the most part, each character stood for a whole syllable in the Cherokee language.

Its simplicity and adaptability to the speech and thought of the Cherokees enabled a willing learner to master it in a few days, and soon a large part of the tribe employed the new invention in uses never known before. When enough of his tribesmen in the West had mastered the alphabet, he returned to the Cherokee Nation in the South and took messages to the Eastern Cherokees from their friends and relatives in

the West. He stayed long enough to teach many of the Eastern Cherokees to read and write in their native tongue and to see the alphabet adopted by his tribesmen. When he returned to Arkansas, he carried messages from the Eastern Cherokees, messages written in the Cherokee characters that he had taught them to write and read. Thus, he bound together the widely separated divisions of his tribe by ties that were near to them, demonstrated the great utility of his work, and awakened a general interest in and appreciation of it.

Sequoyah was known to white people as George Guess. Some believed him to be the son of a Dutch Indian trader and a Cherokee mother. Others believed that Sequoyah's white father was most likely Nathaniel Gist, a personal friend of George Washington, who often traveled in the Cherokee Nation as a hunter, explorer, and soldier. Gist was an extraordinary man whose children were married to leading statesmen and to the children of some of the most prominent families in the country. Descendants of Nathaniel Gist told of a visit by Sequoyah to the Gist home in Kentucky.

Traditional stories reveal how the written language came about. Supposedly, Sequoyah heard some rowdy young men discussing the superior talents of white people. One of them said that the main reason for the superiority was that whites could put a "talk" on a piece of paper and send it any distance, and it would be perfectly understood by those who received it. All admitted that it was so and that such art was far beyond



Lithograph of Sequoyah
History of the Indian Tribes of North America.
Portrait by Charles Bird King in 1828.

the Indian. Sequoyah listened quietly for awhile and then remarked, "You are all fools; why the thing is very easy; I can do it myself." They laughed at him.

At first, he tried to form a character for each Cherokee word, but this involved thousands of characters. Then he began to invent a character for each syllable in the language. Using some characters for syllables and some for letters, he finally had an alphabet of some 200 characters. With his daughter's help, he was able to reduce them to eighty-six characters.

During the years when he worked on his alphabet, he was frequently accused of wasting his time, of being idiotic, and of being lazy. He would listen to the ridicule and criticism; then he would very deliberately light his pipe, pull his spectacles over his eyes, and sit down to his work, without attempting to explain his conduct.

To prove to his people that his alphabet could be used practically, Sequoyah publicly demonstrated how it worked. He asked his daughter to go out of hearing distance; then he asked a distinguished, respected member of the tribe to communicate something to him to be written down. This done, he called his daughter to come into the council. She read the message to them. Then he left the council and his daughter wrote; when he returned, he read aloud what the daughter had written. He then offered to teach others how to do the same.

Few descriptions of Sequoyah survived the time in which he lived. One description was written by Captain John Stuart of the Seventh Cavalry, who saw service in Indian Territory. Sequoyah's home was near the road between Fort Gibson and Fort Smith, so that it was a simple matter for travelers to stop to visit with the Red Sage. Captain Stuart visited with Sequoyah when the Cherokee was about sixty years old.

He was of middle stature, and of rather a slender form, and is slightly lame in one leg, from disease when young. His features are remarkably regular and his face well formed, and rather handsome. His eyes are animated and piercing, showing indications of a brilliancy of intellect far superior to the ordinary portion of his fellow men. His manner is agreeable, and his deportment gentlemanly. He possesses a mild disposition and is patient, but he is energetic and extremely persevering and determined in the pursuit or accomplishment of any object on which he may fix his mind. He is inquisitive, and appears to be exceedingly desirous of acquiring information on all subjects. His mind seems to soar high and wide; and if he could have had the advantages of an

enlightened education, he would no doubt have brought himself to rank high among the acknowledged great men of the age in which he lives.

Sequoyah died while traveling to Mexico, looking for his fellow Cherokees who had removed to Texas rather than to Indian Territory.

It can only be assumed that he wanted to share the Cherokee alphabet with them so that they, too, could read and write in their native language.

Use of Sequoyah's alphabet continues today. Chris Roastingear, daughter of Joe Duck, a highly respected medicine man and conjurer, says, "My father does not know English. Until ten years ago he could not read or write Cherokee. He started studying and within a week had learned to read and write in Cherokee. Now he writes down all sacred formulas and medicine for curing sicknesses of the mind and body. He trains my sister, who is a registered nurse, so she will know how to be a medicine woman. With her medical training plus the things my father teaches her, she will be a great help to her people."

Certainly the most significant contribution and lasting memorial to Sequoyah is the alphabet itself, along with its *subsequent* learning and cultural benefits for a whole nation. Their great advancement in civilization, far beyond that of any other tribe, was directly a result of Sequoyah's works as an inventor and as a willing teacher. An Oklahoma county has been named for him, and one of the buildings in the State Capitol Complex is the Sequoyah Building. The log cabin where he lived and worked on his alphabet has been enclosed in stone to preserve the simple cottage in his memory.

Cherokee Alphabet

D _a	R _e	T _i	Ꭰ _o	Ꭱ _u	i _v
Ꭲ _{ga} Ꭳ _{ka}	Ꭴ _{ge}	Ꭶ _{gi}	Ꭷ _{go}	Ꭸ _{gu}	Ꭹ _{gv}
Ꭺ _{ha}	Ꭻ _{he}	Ꭼ _{hi}	Ꭽ _{ho}	Ꭾ _{hu}	Ꭿ _{hv}
Ꮀ _{la}	Ꮁ _{le}	Ꮂ _{li}	Ꮃ _{lo}	Ꮄ _{lu}	Ꮅ _{lv}
Ꮆ _{ma}	Ꮇ _{me}	Ꮈ _{mi}	Ꮉ _{mo}	Ꮊ _{mu}	
Ꮋ _{na} Ꮌ _{hna} Ꮍ _{nah}	Ꮎ _{ne}	Ꮏ _{ni}	Ꮐ _{no}	Ꮑ _{nu}	Ꮒ _{nv}
Ꮓ _{qua}	Ꮔ _{que}	Ꮕ _{qui}	Ꮖ _{quo}	Ꮗ _{quu}	Ꮘ _{quv}
Ꮙ _{sa} Ꮚ _s	Ꮛ _{se}	Ꮜ _{si}	Ꮝ _{so}	Ꮞ _{su}	Ꮟ _{sv}
Ꮠ _{da} Ꮡ _{ta}	Ꮢ _{de} Ꮣ _{te}	Ꮤ _{di} Ꮥ _{ti}	Ꮦ _{do}	Ꮧ _{du}	Ꮨ _{dv}
Ꮩ _{dla} Ꮪ _{ila}	Ꮫ _{tle}	Ꮬ _{tli}	Ꮭ _{tlo}	Ꮮ _{tlu}	Ꮯ _{tlv}
Ꮯ _{tsa}	Ꮰ _{tse}	Ꮱ _{tso}	Ꮲ _{tso}	Ꮳ _{tsu}	Ꮴ _{tsv}
Ꮵ _{wa}	Ꮶ _{we}	Ꮷ _{wi}	Ꮸ _{wo}	Ꮹ _{wu}	Ꮺ _{wv}
Ꮻ _{ya}	Ꮼ _{ye}	Ꮽ _{yi}	Ꮾ _{yo}	Ꮿ _{yu}	Ᏸ _{yv}

The Cherokee Alphabet

**Sequoyah's
Cherokee
Alphabet is really
a syllabary.**