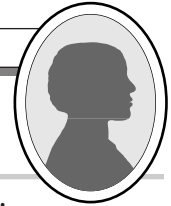


BIOGRAPHY



Sequoyah



When the Cherokeees made their eloquent appeal to the American people to let them remain on their ancestral lands in Georgia, they were the best-informed Native Americans in the nation. Some were probably better read than many of the settlers who wanted to seize their land. Unlike other Native American nations, the Cherokeees had a written language, developed by their own self-taught linguist—Sequoyah.

As you read the passage below, think about the dedication and effort that Sequoyah put into creating a new system of written language.

Sequoyah was born around 1770 in Tennessee to a Cherokee mother and an English trader father. Sequoyah grew up with his mother in the Cherokee culture, never learning English but sometimes using the English name of George Guess. At first a hunter and fur trader, he was severely crippled, possibly in a hunting accident, and became a skilled silversmith to support his family.

Though he had never gone to school and could not read, Sequoyah was fascinated by what he called “talking leaves,” the papers with written language on them that he saw being read in the Cherokee mission schools. Recognizing the importance of reading and writing in the European culture, Sequoyah set out to develop a written language for the Cherokeees. He began a rigorous program of self-education, poring over books from the mission schools, and learning how the letters stood for sounds and spelled out words. For 12 years he experimented with ways to write down Cherokee sounds. By 1821 he had developed a system of 86 symbols that each spelled a Cherokee syllable. To get his system accepted by the Cherokeees, Sequoyah had to overcome their fears. Some Cherokeees suspected that the strange symbols were a sort of witchcraft, and they burned his working papers.

Sequoyah persisted, by teaching his 6-year-old daughter and other children his system and using them to demonstrate it to the Cherokee National Council. Deeply impressed, the Council not only adopted the system as the official written language of the Cherokeees, but also honored Sequoyah with a silver medal.

Soon parts of the Bible were being printed in Cherokee, as were textbooks and other teaching materials. Seemingly overnight, thousands of Cherokeees, young and old, learned to read and write their language. In 1828, the *Cherokee Phoenix*, a weekly newspaper printed in both Cherokee and English, began publication. It continued until 1835, when Georgia authorities closed it, fearful of its power to strengthen Cherokee resistance to the takeover of their land. Just two years later, the Cherokeees were forced to move westward.

Sequoyah had already moved west and was living in what is today Oklahoma. As his last adventure, he went in search of a “lost” band of Cherokeees said to have moved west at the time of the American Revolution. He disappeared into the Southwest, and was not heard from again. He is thought to have died in 1843 in Mexico. Years later, a giant redwood tree and a national park in California were named in his honor.

Questions to Think About

1. What were the “talking leaves” that so fascinated Sequoyah and set him dreaming? What was his major contribution to his people?
2. **Expressing Problems Clearly** How would you describe the problems Sequoyah faced as he set about his task?