Welcome to the Hiwassee River Heritage Center

Nestled on the banks of the Hiwassee River, the twin cities of Charleston and Calhoun form one of Tennessee’s oldest settlement areas and are rich in history. Drawn to this region for its abundant natural resources and wildlife, early peoples built villages and cultivated the soil. Much later, the Cherokee arrived, and Charleston became a gateway into the Cherokee Nation. Travelers needed a passport to enter the town. In 1838, life here changed when the federal government forced the Cherokee to leave on the Trail of Tears. Soon after, Union and Confederate armies occupied the towns and pillaged the farms. After that destruction, the area became an agricultural and transportation center, shaped dramatically by the Tennessee Valley Authority’s Chickamauga Lake in the late 1930s. Hollywood came here in 1960 and told the story of that change through the film *Wild River*. The Heritage Center introduces these stories and many more.

*Spend a day here and explore how the peoples and events of the past shape our lives and stories today.*

*Hiwassee River. Courtesy MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.*

*(above) This area was home to prominent Cherokee leaders Jesse Bushyhead and Lewis Ross. Bushyhead was a well-respected cleric, and Ross was a wealthy businessman who owned a store and ferry landing in present-day Charleston. Lewis Ross, from the collection of the George M. Murrell Home, Oklahoma Historical Society, Park Hill, Oklahoma. Jesse Bushyhead, painted by Charles Bird King, 1839. Courtesy The Athenaeum.*


*This cypress grove in Charleston is just one of many lasting changes the Tennessee Valley Authority brought to the area’s landscape. Courtesy Kevin A. Myers.*
Unearthing the Past

Little was known about the area’s first inhabitants until dam construction by the Tennessee Valley Authority in the 1930s threatened to flood many early settlement sites. Under the supervision of archaeologists, Works Progress Administration employees excavated thirteen sites that were set to be flooded. The effort was called the Chickamauga Basin project. It was entirely managed through the University of Tennessee–Knoxville and supervised by Thomas M. N. Lewis. Several of the excavated sites were near Charleston. The project discovered valuable information, which would have otherwise been lost, about the early people who inhabited the region.


(above) Although artifacts unearthed during excavations were sent to Knoxville for cataloging and analysis, labs were also on-site, including one in Charleston.*

(left) This rectangular house pattern at the Ledford Island site near Charleston was one of many houses excavated in the town and dates to ca. 1450–1550. Large postholes from the now-decayed wooden wall posts can be seen, as well as smaller postholes, possibly for interior benches or partitions. A circular hearth can be seen in the center.*

(right) Archaeologists and fieldwork supervisors Stuart Neitzel and Charles Fairbanks (far left) and the WPA crew who excavated the Rymer and Mouse Creek sites near Charleston.*

*Courtesy Frank H. McClung Museum of Natural History and Culture, University of Tennessee–Knoxville.
The Cherokee Agency at Charleston

In 1819, a delegation of Cherokees met with Secretary of War John C. Calhoun and signed a treaty ceding a portion of their territory. As a result, the Hiwassee River became a boundary between the United States and Cherokee territory. Soon after, the Cherokee Indian Agency moved to present-day Charleston. Federal employees working at the agency, known as Indian agents, were responsible for a number of duties. They handled disputes between Cherokees and European Americans, distributed money and goods, and issued passports for travelers entering or leaving the Cherokee territory, making the Charleston area a major gateway into Cherokee lands. Agents also carried out the “civilization” program, which encouraged American Indians to adopt a European-American lifestyle. Although this program was allegedly meant to improve American Indian life, it was, no doubt, a strategy to acquire Cherokee land and force them westward.

"Your great job ought to be to bold your land separate among yourselves, as your white neighbors; and to live and bring up your children in the same way as they do, and gradually to adopt their laws and manners. It is thus only that you can be prosperous and happy. Without this, you will find you will have to emigrate or become extinct as a people. You see that the Great Spirit has made our form of society stronger than yours, and you must submit to adopt ours, if you wish to be happy by pleasing him."

—John C. Calhoun to the Cherokee Delegation, February 11, 1819
Forcing the Cherokee Westward

“It gives me pleasure to announce to Congress that the benevolent policy of the Government, steadily pursued for nearly thirty years, in relation to the removal of the Indians beyond the white settlements is approaching a happy consummation.”

— Andrew Jackson on the passage of the Indian Removal Act, December 6, 1830

By 1830, Cherokee land was greatly reduced to small portions of Tennessee, North Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama, and the Cherokee were pressured relentlessly to give up more. On May 28, 1830, Congress narrowly passed the Indian Removal Act, which gave the president authority to negotiate treaties of removal with all American Indians. The mounting pressure over removal resulted in the formation of a pro-removal faction in the Cherokee Nation, known as the Treaty Party. On December 29, 1835, twenty Treaty Party members signed the Treaty of New Echota without the knowledge of Principal Chief John Ross, agreeing to give up all Cherokee land and remove to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma) in exchange for five million dollars. The majority of the Cherokee did not support removal and protested the fraudulent treaty vigorously, but the U.S. Senate approved it by a single vote. The treaty was ratified on May 23, 1836, sealing the fate of the Cherokee.

“We cannot remain here in safety and comfort...an unyielding, iron necessity tells us we must leave.”

—Major Ridge, December 1836

(left) This 1900 map depicts diminishing Cherokee lands over the years. Courtesy University of Texas Libraries, University of Texas—Austin.

(below) Signature page of a protest against the Treaty of New Echota by the Cherokee people of the Aquohoe and Taquohe districts, 1836. Courtesy U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.


(above) Principal Chief John Ross worked diligently to have the Treaty of New Echota overturned in favor of a new, fairer agreement. Courtesy Library of Congress.

“From the course our affairs has taken it is evident that the Govt. is determined to remove us at all hazards, and it only now remains for us to do the best we can. I feel very much afraid that you will fail in making a new treaty but still hope that you may succeed in placing our affairs in some better footing than they are.”

—Lewis Ross to John Ross, April 12, 1838
Imprisoning the Cherokee

"Of the 15,000 of those people who are to be removed... it is understood that about four-fifths are opposed, or have become averse to a distant emigration... The troops will probably be obliged to cover the whole country they inhabit, in order to make prisoners and to march or to transport the prisoners, by families either to this place [Fort Cass], Ross’s Landing [present-day Chattanooga], or Gutten’s Landing [present-day Guntersville, Alabama]."

—Gen. Winfield Scott, Order Number 25, May 17, 1838

General Winfield Scott was charged with overseeing the removal of the Cherokee. Beginning in late May 1838, approximately 7,000 military personnel forcibly gathered the Cherokee and held them at internment camps near one of three “emigrating depots” to await their departure. Fort Cass, in present-day Charleston, was the largest depot. It was also the headquarters of General Scott and the entire removal operations. Internment camps at Fort Cass were spread out over a 12 x 4 mile area, and about 7,000 Cherokee were held there. Poor conditions at the camps led to rapid outbreaks of disease and illness. Death was not uncommon at these places. In total, about 15,000 Cherokee were held at camps in Tennessee and Alabama, many for months, waiting to start their journey to Indian Territory in one of 17 detachments.

"The Cherokees are nearly all prisoners. They have been dragged from their houses and encamped at the forts and military posts, all over the nation... Many of the Cherokees, who, a few days ago, were in comfortable circumstances, are now the victims of abject poverty. Some, who have been allowed to return home, under passport, to inquire after their property, have found their cattle, horses, swine, farming tools, and house-furnishings all gone. And this is not a description of extreme cases.”

—Rev. Evan Jones, writing from Camp Hetzel, near Cleveland, June 16, 1838
Leaving the Hiwassee

In June 1838, the first three detachments of Cherokee left from Ross’s Landing to begin their journey to Indian Territory. Hundreds perished from the dire conditions along the way. Hoping to avoid more deaths, on July 23, 1838, the Cherokee Council petitioned the U.S. government to postpone removal until the fall and to allow the Cherokee to control the rest of their removal. Permission for both was granted. On August 23, 1838, travel resumed when Hair Conrad led a detachment of 729 people from Fort Cass. In total, ten detachments consisting of over 9,000 Cherokee left from the Fort Cass area between August and December. Four other detachments left from various places in Tennessee and Alabama, the last of which left by boat from Fort Cass on December 5, 1838, with 231 sick and elderly people and the John Ross family. An estimated 4,000 Cherokee died as a result of removal. Despite this great hardship, the Cherokee people today live on as a renewed nation, and Tennessee remains rich in Cherokee culture.

“At noon all was in readiness for moving, the trains were stretched out in a line along the road through a heavy forest... The temporary camp [structures], covered with boards and some of bark, that for three summer months had been their only shelter and home, were cracking and falling under a blazing flame. The day was bright and beautiful, but a gloomy thoughtfulness was strongly depicted in the timetables of every face... At length the word was given to move on.”

—William Shorey Coodey describing the scene of Hair Conrad’s detachment leaving the camps in the Fort Cass area.

Nearly 150 years later, Congress designated the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail to memorialize and promote a greater awareness of the Cherokee removal. Today, the trail includes approximately 2,200 miles of land and water routes through nine states. Courtesy National Park Service.
A New Era

River, Rails, and Roads...
In the early 19th century, the Cherokee saw the benefits of the Hiwassee River as a means of transporting people and goods into the area, a tradition that continued after the removal. Soon, railroads arrived and allowed local farmers and businesses to ship their products throughout the southeast. Railroads quickly became a favored mode of transportation, but in the 20th century the automobile soon dominated travel with the development of interstate highways. In June 1927, work began on the construction of the Cleveland-to-Charleston link of Lee Highway, a transcontinental highway system that connected New York with California.

Farms to Factories...
The river, rails, and roads helped usher in a new era of industry. In 1952, construction began on the new Bowater paper mill in Calhoun. The location was chosen for its proximity to the Hiwassee River, the railroad, and Lee Highway. All three methods of transportation were used to bring pulpwood to the factory. Industry continued to grow with the arrival of Olin Mathieson Chemical Corporation in 1960, and it continues today.

“The one-mile section of Lee Highway behind the Heritage Center on present-day Market Street NE is the longest intact segment of the highway in Bradley County.”

—Cleveland Daily Banner, July 21, 1954
Caught in the Crossfire of War

During the Civil War, Union and Confederate forces clashed as they vied for control of the East Tennessee & Georgia Railroad, which served as a supply line between Knoxville and Chattanooga. As a result, the railroad bridge over the Hiwassee River between Charleston and Calhoun was a target throughout the war. Residents in the area were divided in their loyalties and sometimes placed themselves in the crossfire. In an attempt to aid the Union cause and push Confederate forces out of the area, on November 8, 1861, Union sympathizers successfully burned five railroad bridges, including the bridge over the Hiwassee River. Later, several African Americans did their part to assist Union forces. Risking their own safety, Abraham Bates and Beverly Weir provided Union soldiers with intelligence and helped them find routes to safely cross the Hiwassee River.

“It affords me a great pleasure to report to you that I have given the rebel General Wheeler a round thrashing this morning.”

—Col. Bernard Laiboldt, December 28, 1863

“I was threatened by the Rebels to be shot because I had shown Union men how and where to cross the [Hiwassee] River. Had to leave my house and lay out in the woods to keep from being killed by the Rebel Mobs.”

—Abraham Bates

“I spent many a night in setting Union men across the Hiwassee River, as I lived immediately on the bank of the River. Would take them to a cave in a Bluff on the River where they could be concealed in day time, and then I would go with them to another place of concealment or deliver them over to another friend of the Cause of the Union.”

—Beverly Weir, Charleston, Tennessee
Struggles on the Home Front

Destroying the Community
Although only skirmishes rather than battles took place in this area during the Civil War, the constant presence of the armies disrupted community life. Soldiers occupied, damaged, and sometimes destroyed local buildings. Union forces under General William T. Sherman “completely destroyed” Shiloh Presbyterian Church in Calhoun by dismantling the building and reusing the lumber to build barracks. When federal forces occupied the Hiwassee Masonic Lodge in Calhoun between November 1863 and June 1865, they cut holes through the brick walls to turn the lodge into a fortified defensive position.

“They tore out the inside layer of brick for use in constructing camp chimneys, etc., and piled salt meat against the brick wall, thus soaking the wall with grease and oil so as to destroy the mortar, causing the wall to crack and become so unsafe that the entire building, as a result of this usage, had to be torn down.”

—Findings in Case of Methodist Episcopal Church South, Charleston, Tenn., January 8, 1908

Unwanted Guests
When the home front collided with the battlefront, residents found their property under threat and their homes occupied. While men were away fighting, those remaining, often women, fought their own battle of keeping enough food and supplies for their families. Regularly, soldiers from both armies raidied homes, stealing what little the residents had. Both armies used local homes, such as the Henegar House, for headquarters.

“General Sherman said to father, ‘If you Union folks are so loyal, why haven’t you kept the Rebels out of East Tennessee?’ Father’s reply was, ‘Didn’t you report to the War Department you would have to have (stating a large number, which I have forgotten) of additional troops to take East Tennessee and hold it?’ To this report the general gave a dry laugh and immediately changed his attitude.”

—Lucie Henegar Allen, daughter of H. Benton Henegar
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