In December 1835, a small faction of Cherokee, led by Major Ridge, John Ridge, Elias Boudinot, and others, acting on their own and without the consent of Principal Chief John Ross, signed the Treaty of New Echota, setting the conditions for the removal of the Cherokee to Indian Territory in present-day Oklahoma. Considering the treaty to be fraudulent, Ross, backed by the majority of Cherokees, protested the treaty vigorously, but their voices went unheard.

In May 1838, 7,000 federal troops and state militia, under the command of Major General Winfield Scott, began forcibly rounding up the Cherokee from their homes in Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee and marching them to one of three main emigrating depots before beginning their journey west on what is now known as the Trail of Tears.

You are currently standing in a former Cherokee community and the location of Fort Cass, the largest of the emigrating depots established for Cherokee removal. Here, the majority of Cherokees were forced to wait for months in internment camps spread out over the emigrating depot’s 12 x 4-mile area before departing on their journey west.

Along this trail are panels featuring the words and experiences of those individuals involved in the removal, from federal officials on one side to Cherokees and missionaries on the other. Consider what they thought and felt at this momentous time in our history.
We are overwhelmed! Our hearts are sickened, our utterance is paralyzed, when we reflect on the condition in which we are placed, by the audacious practices of unprincipled men...

- Principal Chief John Ross to the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, Red Clay Council Ground, Cherokee Nation, September 28, 1836

John Ross served as the Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation from 1828-1866. During his nearly forty years in office, he led his people through the devastation of their forced removal to Indian Territory in present-day Oklahoma and the U.S. Civil War.

Courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.
The full moon of May is already on the wane; and before another shall have passed way, every Cherokee man, woman and child in those states [North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee] must be in motion to join their brethren in the far West.

- General Winfield Scott to the Cherokees, May 10, 1838
In truth, our cause is your own; it is the cause of liberty and of justice, it is based upon your own principles... Spare our people! Spare the wreck of our prosperity! Let not our deserted homes become the monuments of our desolation!

- John Ross to the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, Red Clay Council Ground, Cherokee Nation, September 28, 1836

Principal Chief John Ross vigorously protested the validity of the Treaty of New Echota to the United States government in hopes of overturning it. The excerpted protest and memorial was also signed by thirty-one members of the National Committee and National Council, 2,174 Cherokee citizens, and several other prominent Cherokee leaders. A number of other memorials were sent, including one with the names of more than 15,000 Cherokee.

Courtesy of National Portrait Gallery.
Spare Our People

Ask [the Cherokees] when they are going to remove west and they will answer you by saying they would rather die here than go west to die.

- General Nathaniel Smith, Superintendent of Cherokee Removal, to C.A. Harris, Cherokee Agency East (Charleston, TN), April 25, 1837

Background:
Calhoun Community Cemetery, formerly the Methodist Episcopal South Cemetery.

Thousands of Cherokee are estimated to have died as a result of removal, both in the camps and en route to Indian Territory. The payment voucher seen here is for 469 coffins for 185 adults and 284 children who perished at the Fort Cass internment camps over a period of approximately two months.

Courtesy of Sequoyah National Research Center, University of Arkansas at Little Rock.
Anticipation Grows

The most intense anxiety of mind prevails throughout the nation.

- Lewis Ross to John Ross, Cherokee Agency (Charleston, TN), January 17 [and 18], 1838

The times are gloomy. The black clouds are gathering fast around us. Nothing but destruction stares us in the face. What is to be our fate god only knows.

- Lewis Ross to John Ross, Cherokee Agency (Charleston, TN), April 6, 1838

Lewis Ross wrote to his brother, Principal Chief John Ross, on a number of occasions expressing the anxiety and unease both he and others were feeling and looking to his brother for reassurance during the uncertain time leading up to the forced removal.

Courtesy of John Ross Papers Collection, Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma.
Anticipation Grows

Lieutenant John Wolcott Phelps served in the 4th Artillery and traveled with his regiment through the Agency (present-day Charleston, Tennessee) to North Carolina to assist with the Cherokee removal.

The [Agency] was thronged with Indians, contractors, teamsters and those persons who were attracted by prospects of gain.

- Lieutenant John Wolcott Phelps, June 21, 1838

Lieutenant John Wolcott Phelps served in the 4th Artillery and traveled with his regiment through the Agency (present-day Charleston, Tennessee) to North Carolina to assist with the Cherokee removal.

Courtesy of the private collection of Thomas St. John.
Preparing for Removal

Our situation is truly a critical one. Our whole country is full of troops and fortifications and should it be determined by the Govmt. to remove the Cherokees by force under the fraudulent Treaty by the kind of Soldiers which are amongst us I fear that serious troubles will arise.

- Lewis Ross to John Ross, Cherokee Agency (Charleston, TN), April 20, 1838

Lewis Ross, brother of Principal Chief John Ross, was a wealthy businessman who lived in the Agency Area (present-day Charleston) and operated a store and ferry in the community.

Courtesy of George M. Murrell Home, Oklahoma Historical Society, Park Hill, OK.
Preparing for Removal

I have all necessary preparations made, having upwards of 600,000 rations on hand, and boats and wagons sufficient to my command to carry [the Cherokee] off comfortably.

- General Nathaniel Smith to C.A. Harris, Cherokee Agency East (Charleston, TN), May 17, 1838

Top: From foodstuffs to guns, thousands of items were needed to carry out the Cherokee removal. This document shows the quantity of flour, bacon, bread, salt, soap, candles, beans, vinegar, and coffee rations at Fort Cass in April 1838, including the number needed for 496 men for 82 days and the number turned over to the Indian Department.

Bottom: Letter dated April 6, 1838, listing guns and ammunition sent from the Mount Vernon Arsenal to Fort Cass, which included 600,000 musket ball and buckshot cartridges, 100,000 musket flints, 20 barrels of rifle powder, and 10,000 rifle flints, among others.

Courtesy of Museum of the Cherokee Indian.
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... Our brother [Jesse] Bushyhead and his family, Rev. Stephen Foreman, native missionary of the American Board [of Commissioners for Foreign Missions], the speaker of the national council, and several men of character and respectability, with their families, are here prisoners.

- Evan Jones, Camp Hetzel, near Cleveland, TN, June 16, 1838

Evan Jones was a respected Baptist missionary to the Cherokee for fifty years. During removal, he traveled with the Cherokee to Indian Territory, serving as the assistant conductor of the Situwakee detachment.

Courtesy of Grant Foreman Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society.
Prisoners

My troops already occupy many positions in the country that you are to abandon, and thousands and thousands are approaching from every quarter, to render resistance and escape alike hopeless. All those troops, regular and militia, are your friends. Receive them and confide in them as such. Obey them when they tell you that you can remain no longer in this country.

— Major General Winfield Scott to the Cherokees, Cherokee Agency (Charleston, TN), May 10, 1838

The Cherokee were given until May 23, 1838, to remove voluntarily, but few left before the deadline. From his headquarters in present-day Charleston, Major General Winfield Scott delivered this warning to the Cherokees to cooperate with the soldiers and militia in anticipation of the deadline.

Courtesy of Library of Congress.
On last Friday two Cherokee men came into our camps... for the purpose of ascertaining whether any thing could be done for their relief... They said they left their families sick and one of them said he had lost one of his children... When I told these men that we were ourselves all prisoners and could do nothing for their relief, the young man who lost one of his children manifested a great deal of feeling and his eyes immediately filled with tears, his countenance indicated emotions of dispare [sic].

- Stephen Foreman to David Greene, Camp Hetzel, Cleveland, TN, June 29, 1838

The Reverend Stephen Foreman was a Cherokee Presbyterian minister and politician. During removal, he served as an assistant conductor for the Old Field detachment to Indian Territory.

Courtesy of George Washington Smith Papers, Special Collections/ Morris Library, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.
Sickness in the Camps

As a very natural result of collecting and marching...men, women and children of all ages and conditions, changing suddenly, and very materially all their habits of life... We should feel little astonishment at finding a high grade of Diarrhea, hazardous Dysentery, and urgent Remittent Fever prevailing to a great and deplorably fatal extent.

In addition to this, Measles and Whooping Cough appeared epidemically among the Cherokees about the first of June... All these Diseases are now rife among them.

- Principal Disbursing Agent Captain John Page, Cherokee Agency (Charleston, TN), July 20, 1838

Top: Medical professionals were hired to care for the Cherokees at the various internment camps. Monthly reports documenting the sick, such as this one written by Attending Physician Alfred M. Folger for the eastern fork of the Mouse Creek encampment at Fort Cass in July 1838, details the diseases and number of Cherokee treated, the number vaccinated, the number who died, and general remarks from the physician.

I have often wished to enjoy your company once more but it is very uncertain whether I shall ever again have that pleasure. If we Cherokees are to be driven to the west by the cruel hand of oppression to seek a new home in the west, it will be impossible.

- Jane Bushyhead to Martha Thompson, Red Clay, Cherokee Nation, March 10, 1838
It affords me sincere pleasure to apprise the Congress of the entire removal of the Cherokee Nation of Indians to their new homes west of the Mississippi. The measures authorized by Congress at its last session, with a view to the long-standing controversy with them, have the happiest effects.

- Martin Van Buren, message to Congress, December 1838

Martin Van Buren succeeded Andrew Jackson as the eighth president of the United States. The Cherokee removal was carried out during his presidency, and an estimated 4,000 Cherokee died as a result. Upon arriving in Indian Territory, the Cherokee began the long and ultimately successful process of rebuilding their lives, while continuing to preserve their cultural traditions.

Courtesy of Library of Congress.
This National Historic Trail Experience was made possible by:

US Government Recreation Trails Program (RTP) Grant

Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation

Caldwell Paving Company

City of Charleston

National Park Service

Center for Historic Preservation at Middle Tennessee State University

Cleveland/Bradley Chamber of Commerce

GeoServices

Southeast Tennessee Development District

Tennessee Valley Authority

United Way of the Ocoee Region