People have been attracted to the Red Clay area’s multiple limestone springs and waterways, rich soil, and wild game for thousands of years. Their cultures changed over time, but we can learn about their lives through some of the tools they left behind. Many of the items used by people hundreds and thousands of years ago were made from plant and animal material, which does not survive well in the ground. As a result, most of the tools found in this region are made from stone, pottery, or bone and were used to produce or consume food.

From 1973 to 1975, archaeologists conducted excavations at Red Clay, searching for the location of the Cherokee Council House that was used from 1832-1837. They didn’t find the Council House, but they did find pieces of manufactured pottery that has been dated to the 1830s. These pottery pieces were likely part of the dishes that people attending the council meetings used to eat their meals.

Archaeological students from Lee College assist in excavations of the Red Clay Council Ground, Summer 1974.

Courtesy of Tennessee Division of Archaeology.
Gender defined much of Cherokee society. Women controlled household production and agricultural pursuits. The men were hunters, warriors, and traders, traveling far from home during annual winter hunts and trading journeys. A person’s mother or female line determined kinship, clan affiliation, and tribal membership. When a couple married, the man lived with his wife’s family. If a couple separated, the house and the children belonged to the woman.

The Cherokee had seven clans: Long Hair Clan, Blue Clan, Wolf Clan, Wild Potato Clan, Deer Clan, Bird Clan, and Paint Clan. A person was not allowed to marry someone in his or her own clan, so each town had a variety of clans. If a clan member was injured or killed, then his or her clan would often seek revenge for the loss. The masks displayed here represent the different clans.

Aspects of Cherokee daily life in the early 1800s can be seen in *View of Toksou, Tennessee* by Antoine Philippe d’Orleans, c. 1804. Note the men fishing and carrying weapons, while women grind corn and care for children. 

*Courtesy of National Library of Australia.*
The Cherokee traded with Europeans for decades before the first Anglo settlers moved into Cherokee territory. A brisk trade in deerskins stretched from Cherokee villages west of the Appalachian Mountains to the major English seaport of Charleston. The constant exchange of goods between Cherokee families and European traders soon led to closer relationships. Traders often married Cherokee women. Due to Cherokee matrilineal practice, the children of these biracial unions were Cherokee.

European settlers wanted to exchange goods and treaty promises for Cherokee land. Once settlers began to arrive in numbers in the late 1700s, they were dismissive of traditional Cherokee culture. The Europeans saw missions, typically organized and administered by religious groups, as the best way to educate and acculturate Cherokees to a Euro-American way of life. Missions included Brainerd in today’s Hamilton County, Red Clay Mission nearby at today’s Flint Springs, Tennessee, and Spring Place in north Georgia.
The Cherokee built both large and small buildings from surrounding natural resources. Prior to the late 1700s, their homes also reflected the needs of different seasons in the Southern climate. During the summer, they lived in light, airy, open-sided houses made of river cane. In the winter, they lived in more airtight and substantial winter houses of wattle and daub framing, covered in clay with roofs made of narrow boards.

When the Red Clay Visitor Center was constructed in the late 1970s, crews discovered postholes of what was likely a Cherokee winter house at this site. In the park, you will find reconstructions of two common types of Cherokee log dwellings from the early 1800s — the farm of an upper middle class family and simple cabins used for council meetings. Cherokees became very skilled in log construction, and by the time of removal, they largely lived in log buildings, but some lived in frame or brick homes.

… their modern houses are tolerably well built. A number of thick posts is fixed in the ground… Between each of these posts is placed a smaller one, and the whole is wattled with twigs like a basket, which is then covered with Clay very smooth, and sometimes white-washed. Instead of tiles, they cover them with narrow boards.”
– Lt. Henry Timberlake’s Memoirs, 1765

The more substantial winter houses, like this reconstructed example at Fort Loudoun State Historic Park, retained heat during cold weather. Courtesy of MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.

Open-sided houses, like this reconstructed summer house at Fort Loudoun State Historic Park, helped keep occupants cool. Courtesy of MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.
The Cherokee were not the only native people who faced removal from Red Clay. In 1836, approximately 2,000–3,000 Creek refugees from Georgia and Alabama fled to the Cherokee Nation to avoid removal with the Creek Nation. The U.S. military removed most of the Creek refugees from Cherokee lands in the spring and summer of 1837, including about 122 Creeks who lived at or near the Red Clay Council Ground. One elderly Creek man who lived near Red Clay died from a shot fired by an army soldier. In August 1837, Creek headmen asked the Cherokee General Council for asylum, and the council granted it. The remaining Creeks stayed with their Cherokee hosts until fall 1838 when both tribes were removed to the west.


"Chiefs of the Creek Nation, & A Georgian Squatter" by Captain Basil Hall, c. 1828. Courtesy of Alabama Department of Archives and History.

"We have listened to your talk.
You say the officer of the United States wishes us to go to the West. We are sorry to hear this talk. Our minds are troubled. We do not want to go to the West, unless the Cherokees go there too."
-The Creeks residing in the Cherokee Nation to John Ross, Principal Chief, August 12, 1837
The Cherokee owned land collectively as a tribe. Individual families owned their improvements to the land, such as buildings, fences, and fruit trees. After the U.S. Senate ratified the Treaty of New Echota in 1836, the federal government sent appraisers into the Cherokee Nation to evaluate the Cherokees’ improvements. Rarely did the federal appraisers give full value to what the Cherokee owned. At the Red Clay Council Ground area, the appraisers counted 91 log buildings, including those owned by Cherokee families who lived and farmed here. Most of the buildings, however, were used for council gatherings and events.

According to the Moravian missionary Heinrich Gottlieb Clauder, who visited the 1837 council meeting, “The camps were all new & almost in a line, in the rear was a small stream flowing silently along. The Council house & stand for public speakers were on a high hill in front of the public cooking establishments. Dry goods shanties were also erected, in some of which, the violin, in the hands of merry players drew many listeners & spectators.”

This portrait, *International Indian Council* by John Mix Stanley, depicts a council meeting held at Tahlequah, Indian Territory, in 1843. The reconstructed Council House here at Red Clay is based on this portrait and firsthand accounts of the council meetings.

*Courtesy of Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Misses Henry.*
**After the Cherokee Removal** in 1838, the council grounds were sold to settlers, who divided it into multiple farms. In 1852, the completed East Tennessee and Georgia Railroad passed through the eastern half of what is now Red Clay State Historic Park, with a passenger depot located at the Tennessee and Georgia border.

During the Civil War, both Confederate and Union troops used this valuable railroad corridor. At least three skirmishes took place within the present park boundaries. Following its victory in the Battle of Chattanooga, the Union army destroyed the depot and tore up some of the track on November 27, 1863. The railroad rebuilt a passenger depot and section house on the southeast corner of the park property during Reconstruction.

"At Red Clay Station a few hours were devoted to this pleasant diversion [destroying a section of railroad], and soon three miles of sleepers were reduced to fire wood, and the rails to old junk. There being no further use for cars and the depot, they were burned. Neither Longstreet nor Bragg could now get any comfort from that railroad."

– Colonel Adin B. Underwood, 33rd Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, U.S. Army, 1881
Deed for land from Tilmond H. Pitner to the Trustees of Andrews Chapel, August 6, 1884.

Courtesy of MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.

Like their white planter neighbors, some Cherokees owned enslaved people of African descent to work their land and to serve their households. There were likely 19 enslaved people who lived at Red Clay in 1835.

Three years later, during the Cherokee Removal, these enslaved people traveled west with their owners. White farmers and planters reintroduced slavery to Red Clay after they acquired the land following the Cherokee Removal. Most enslaved people were likely engaged in farming and animal husbandry.

During Reconstruction, freedmen built Andrews Chapel Methodist Church on the Tennessee-Georgia boundary at the southwest corner of the park. As the town of Cohutta grew, the church’s congregation in 1923 placed the building on log rollers and used mules to move it to Cohutta.

You can still see Andrews Chapel by driving 2.4 miles south on Red Clay Park Road. The church is on the east side of the road.

“We did all the work on the church and stuff back then. A lot of work me and my dad did. He was a building man. He built the steeple and the bell [tower]. I know they would ring that bell every Sunday.”

— Billie Prater, Andrews Chapel Trustee, 2016

Andrews Chapel Methodist Church.

Courtesy of MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.

(ENSLAVED PEOPLE & FREEDMEN AT RED CLAY)
This exhibit is sponsored by The Center for Historic Preservation, Middle Tennessee State University, the Cleveland-Bradley Chamber of Commerce, and the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area.

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