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 Tokouo, 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.