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.
... 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 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.

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.*