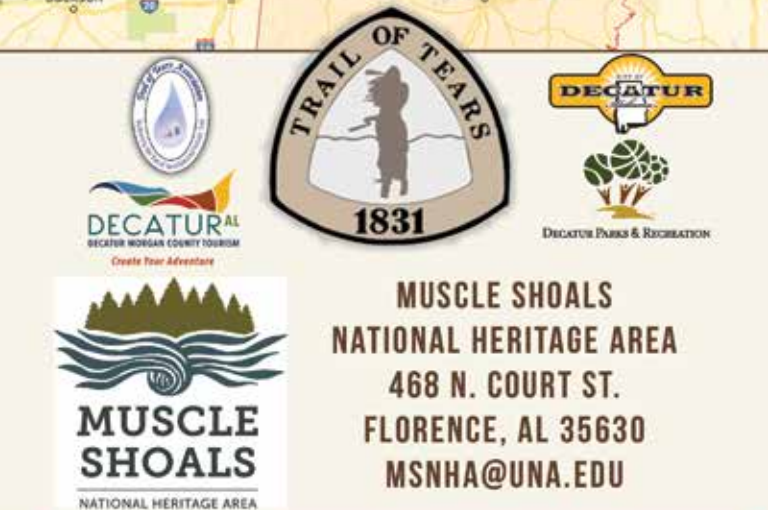


# DECATUR, ALABAMA TRAIL OF TEARS SITES

Decatur Railroad Depot  
The Dancy-Polk House  
Old State Bank  
Rhea-McEntire House  
Morgan County Archives



MUSCLE SHOALS  
NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA  
468 N. COURT ST.  
FLORENCE, AL 35630  
MSNHA@UNA.EDU

WWW.MSNHA.UNA.EDU

PRINTED IN U.S.A./6-18

# TRAIL OF TEARS WALKING TOUR DECATUR ALABAMA



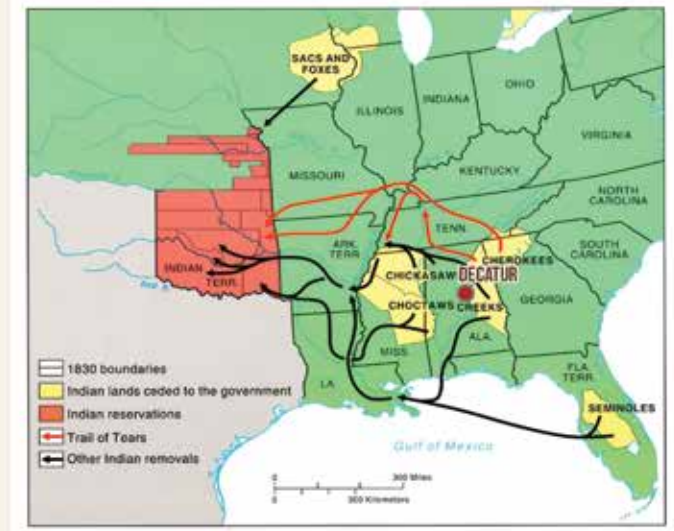
MUSCLE SHOALS NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA  
WWW.MSNHA.UNA.EDU

## Indian Removal Act Leads to the Trail of Tears

Fueled by President Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Act of 1830, the Trail of Tears was the forced removal of Native American Tribes from tribal lands in the Southeastern United States to reservations in Oklahoma. The Tennessee River comprised a portion of the journey for these Native Americans. The Decatur Trail of Tears Walking tour provides a glimpse of the tragedy caused by the Trail of Tears and reveals the bravery and resilience of the people who traveled it. Roughly 2,300 Cherokee moved through Decatur on their way to Indian Territory in Oklahoma. These groups had been forced to walk from their tribal lands in Georgia, Tennessee, and North and South Carolina. After reaching Chattanooga, they were packed onto barges to travel down the Tennessee River. Their river travel was halted at Decatur due to low water levels, and several of these groups were forced to stay overnight in Decatur and travel by railroad to Tusculum where the river deepened. The Decatur Trail of Tears Walking Tour is a part of the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail.



Andrew Jackson



Warren, Jazmin. "Annotation on Smithsonian Learning Lab Resource: Trail of Tears." Smithsonian Learning Lab, Smithsonian Center for Learning and Digital Access, 27 Jan. 2018. [learninglab.si.edu/q/11-c/tHFRAYq6WgXFidNe#r/257850](https://learninglab.si.edu/q/11-c/tHFRAYq6WgXFidNe#r/257850).



ON THE COVER: Warren, Jazmin. "Annotation on Smithsonian Learning Lab Resource: Forced Removal of Native Americans." Smithsonian Learning Lab, Smithsonian Center for Learning and Digital Access, 27 Jan. 2018. [learninglab.si.edu/q/11-c/tHFRAYq6WgXFidNe#r/257853](https://learninglab.si.edu/q/11-c/tHFRAYq6WgXFidNe#r/257853).





Rhodes Ferry Landing circa 1890.

## 1 RHODES FERRY LANDING

Rhodes Ferry Landing was the dropping off point for the 2,300 Native Americans that were forcibly removed through Decatur. The landing was essential to the steamboats that traversed the Tennessee because it was the last stop before the Muscle Shoals, whose low water levels created class 3 & 4 rapids, and decreased in elevation approximately 130 feet over the 35 mile stretch of river<sup>1</sup>. The landing bears the name of the original community that existed before the town of Decatur, Rhodes Ferry, and was operated by Dr. Henry Rhodes who was also a wealthy land owner and businessman in, what would later become, Decatur. Rhodes would later serve as a board member of the Tuscumbia, Courtland, and Decatur Railroad that was utilized to move the Cherokees being moved around the Muscle Shoals safely.

The landing was a connecting point for the two towns of Decatur and Tuscumbia because cargo could be loaded from barges onto trains at either location, and then shipped to where deeper water resumed. However, during the Trail of Tears, the landing moved human cargo in the form of 2,300 Cherokee who were removed through the Ridge, Deas, and Whiteley parties by way of the Tuscumbia, Courtland, and Decatur Railroad from 1837-1838. The Ridge party (approx. 466) were the first to journey on the TC & D RR from Decatur, and they arrived in Decatur on March 7th, 1837 by river on the steamboat *Knoxville*.<sup>2</sup> The journey from Ross's landing, near Chattanooga, to Decatur had been five days of difficult travel due to the cramped flatboats in which the Cherokee were ushered into for their river journey. Firsthand accounts state that the Ridge party arrived in Decatur around six-thirty in the evening, amidst a pouring rain that kept the party from disembarking from the flatboats until after seven.<sup>3</sup> After disembarking from the flatboats, the Cherokee were ushered up Bank Street from Rhodes Ferry Landing, past the train depot,

and into the federal warehouses where they would spend the night until the trains arrived to take them to Tuscumbia.

Like the Ridge party, the Deas and Whiteley parties arrived in the summer of 1838 on steamboats from Eastern Tennessee. Due to the low water levels of the Tennessee River, these parties were routed by the TC & D RR around the Muscle Shoals, but little is known of their time in Decatur.<sup>4</sup> Lt. Edward Deas's detachment reached Decatur on June 9th to find out that the train cars that were supposed to take them to Tuscumbia would not be ready until the next morning.<sup>5</sup> The Deas party slept in the Federal warehouses near the depot and left for Tuscumbia on June 10th, but no known personal accounts from the party exist. The railroad ran on schedule for the Whiteley party, and allowed them to travel to Tuscumbia on June 21st, the same day as they arrived.

<sup>1</sup>Roland Harper, Natural Resources of the Tennessee Valley Region in Alabama Special Report 17. Geological Survey of Alabama. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 1942). 31-32.

<sup>2</sup>Grant Foreman, Indian Removal-The Emigration of the Five Civilized Tribes of Indians (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953) 233-236.

<sup>3</sup>John Elle, Trail of Tears: Rise and Fall of the Cherokee Nation (New York: Anchor Books, 1989) 363.

<sup>4</sup>Gail King, "The Army Roundup", North Alabama's Tuscumbia, Courtland, and Decatur Railroad and Its Role During Cherokee Emigration/Removal Beginning in 1837. 266.

<sup>5</sup>Edward Deas, "June 9th" (Diary, Decatur, Alabama, 1838).



## Heritage Signs at Rhodes Ferry Park

### UPROOTED FROM HOME and WORDS OF RESISTANCE

Located on the main path into Rhodes Ferry Park, this pair of signs are the first you will come to and serve as an introduction into the removal of some 2,300 Cherokee people from 1837 to 1838 at this sight. Sequoyah, a Cherokee trader, silversmith and blacksmith, is commemorate for creating the Sequoyan Syllabary for the Cherokee Language.

### CHEROKEE TRAIL OF TEARS

Erected by the Alabama Historical Association in 2015, this sign is near the Rhodes Ferry Park gazebo. The sign provides detailed information on the detachments that landed in Decatur during the removal of the Cherokee people.

### FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL and PACKED WITH PEOPLE

The last two signs are located on an overlook on the south bank of the Tennessee River. It faces west towards the Decatur railroad bridge and the direction of the new homelands of the Cherokee nation.





Decatur warehouses near Rhodes Ferry Landing, circa 1864

## 2 WAREHOUSES

Situated near the Decatur Depot were warehouses that were used predominantly to store cotton and other bulk goods that arrived or left by either the railroad or steamboat. These structures were roughly 150 ft. by 100 ft, and built by the Tuscumbia, Courtland and Decatur Railroad. Decatur lacked proper accommodations for the large parties of Cherokee that passed through, and were forced to utilize the warehouses as temporary shelters to house two of the three parties.

The Ridge Party arrived in Decatur in the afternoon of March 7th, but were unable to start moving the Ridge party to Tuscumbia by train until the following morning. In a diary entry for March 8th, Dr. Lillybridge reveals that after the first train departed with a portion of the Ridge Party, conditions worsened and the remainder of the party was forced to return to the warehouses and remain in Decatur:

*from 3 o'clock til Sun Set the Indians continued setting upon the open Carrs, waiting the arrival of the Locomotive, the weather having become very cold , their condition was quite uncomfortable at length the order was given that the train would not start til morning. The Indians were immediately and anxiously engaged in selecting their bedding for the night.*<sup>6</sup>

Upon realizing that they would not be able to move to Tuscumbia until the following day, the members of the Ridge party returned to the Warehouses, and attempted to make themselves comfortable for the night, but no comfort was found. Lillybridge details the conditions that the party endured for the night:

*no one had made it his business to aid and direct the Indians, where they could lie for the night. It appears that no order or direction had been given in this particular, except that they would lodge in the Ware house...the Indians were afraid to lie down for fear of being run over. No lights were furnished them, and they were grouping in the dark in a pitiful manner. The*

*Physician [Lillybridge], at this time, took the responsibility upon himself, to request the R.R. Agent, to furnish lights, which was forthwith done. He also went round and directed where Indians could make their beds.*<sup>7</sup>

A lack of comfort was an understatement for the Ridge party’s stay in the Federal warehouses, and many within the party suffered because of the conditions they were subjected to. For instance, Dr. Lillybridge states, “A number of cases of colds, from the exposure of the last 48 hours, but the Carrs, being about to start at an early hour, the physician thought it more advisable to see that all had a good warm cup of Coffee than to resort to medicine & to see that those complaining were in a comfortable condition for transportation.”<sup>8</sup>

His concern for their well-being was overshadowed by the necessity of their ability to be moved as quickly and efficiently as possible. The next day, Lillybridge left with the first train departing Decatur, but, while traveling, it was reported that some who were left behind were sick.<sup>9</sup> According to his journal, Lillybridge left the group on the train, and used a mail car to return to Decatur in order to care for the infirm.<sup>10</sup> Dr. Lillybridge would stay overnight with the final part of the party left in Decatur, and depart on the morning of the 10th, and his journal entry for March 10th reports that they arrived in Tuscumbia that night to find all of the party well again.<sup>11</sup>

Lieutenant Deas, who traveled through Decatur during the summer of 1838, kept no record of the experience with his party in the federal warehouses during their overnight stay, and Lieutenant Whiteley was not required to house his party overnight.

<sup>6</sup>Grant Foreman, *Indian Removal-The Emigration of the Five Civilized Tribes of Indians* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953) 236-239.  
<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.* 236-239, <sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, <sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, <sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, <sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*

## 3 RHEA-MCENTIRE HOUSE

The Rhea-McEntire House in Decatur belonged to John Sevier Rhea. At the time of removal, it would have been possible for the family living in the house to see Native Americans disembarking from the Ferries, and their long walk from the end of Sycamore Street to the Railroad Warehouses. The house sits at the Northeast corner of Market and Sycamore street, and overlooks the former site of Rhodes Ferry landing. Rhea began and finished construction during 1836, but, during the Panic of 1837, Rhea was stricken by the severe economic downturn, and was forced to forfeit the house to the State Bank of Alabama in 1839.

John Sevier Rhea and his wife would have been eye witnesses to the atrocious conditions that Cherokees were subjected to at Rhodes Ferry Landing. The house, which overlooks the bluff would have been able to see the landing, and the long winding march up Bank street to their quarters for the night. It was eventually sold in 1839 to another Decatur merchant, Alexander



Rhea-McEntire House circa 1900.

Patterson.<sup>18</sup> Eventually, Patterson deeded the property to his daughter Margaret and her husband Dr. Aaron Adair Burleson for the price of “one dollar and ‘love and affection.’”<sup>19</sup>

While living in the house, the Burleson family experienced the American Civil War in a unique way. Dr. Burleson served as a surgeon for the Confederate Army, but his house was utilized as military headquarters for both Union and Confederate leadership at different times for operations in the area.<sup>20</sup> It is confirmed that the 102nd Ohio Regiment was present at the house in 1865 because upon the death of Abraham Lincoln the regimental band performed a funeral dirge on the rooftop widow’s walk.<sup>21</sup>

The Burlesons sold their house in 1869 to Jerome Hinds, a wealthy merchant and carpetbagger in Decatur that had served with 8th Illinois Infantry during the Civil War, and the house remained in their name for twenty-five years until it sold to H.I. Freeman in 1894.<sup>22</sup> Freeman sold the house in 1895 to R.P. McEntire. The home is currently under private ownership.

<sup>18</sup>Robert Gamble, “Rhea-McEntire House” National Register of Historic Places Inventory/Nomination Form. Alabama Historical Commission, Montgomery, August 30, 1984.  
<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.* <sup>20</sup>*Ibid.* <sup>21</sup>*Ibid.* <sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

## 4 OLD STATE BANK

Built in 1833, the Old State Bank has been witness to multiple historic events including the Trail of Tears, two economic depressions, and the Civil War, but was utilized for other purposes during its existence that create a rich history surrounding the building.

The creation of the banking system was authorized by the Alabama General Assembly during their 1830 session. The Old State Bank was originally intended as the Tennessee Valley branch for the State Bank of Alabama, and was part of the effort to establish additional branches of the State Bank of Alabama.<sup>15</sup> The Decatur branch, along with others in Montgomery, Cahaba, and Mobile formed the infrastructure of the



The Old State Bank building circa 1890.

banking system for Alabama.

The State Bank’s influence over events in the local area can first be seen in its relationship to the TC&D Railroad. James Fennell, Henry Rhodes, and Jesse Garth were at some point on the Board of Directors for both the TC&D and the Decatur branch of the Old State Bank. The intermingled relationship between the two led to a less than ethical financial relationship that enabled the railroad to stay financially solvent.<sup>16</sup> During the time of the Trail of Tears, the Old State Bank was positioned as it is now, on the Southwest corner of Market and Church street, overlooking the Tennessee River. Employees would have been able to see the column of Native Americans make their way toward, up Bank street, and from the rear of the building they would have been able to see the procession leave from the Railroad Depot the following day. In spite of initial success, the unethical business practices eventually led the State Bank into financial ruin, and by 1840 the Niles Register estimated the Decatur branch had accumulated an outstanding debt of nearly one million dollars and by 1845 the massive building was vacant.<sup>17</sup>

However, during the Civil War the bank was repurposed as a guardhouse and hospital. The remnants of skirmishes between Union and Confederate soldiers attempting to occupy or retake Decatur can be seen in the massive limestone columns on the front porch that were scared by musket fire and miniball that struck them. The State Bank building survived the war intact, and was again repurposed for the First National Bank in 1881 until FNB completed its new building in 1902. After this, it was utilized as a private residence and office by Dr. J. Y. Cantwell. Later the building, suffering from deterioration, was deeded to the city of Decatur in 1933 and used as an American Legion Post until the 1970s when the site was added to the National Register of Historical Places. The American Legion Post



graciously donated the building to the City of Decatur for restoration. The Bank currently operates as a museum and tourist attraction with free guided tours.

The history of the Old State Bank reveals the importance that it had for the removal process because removal through Decatur would have been impossible without the TC&D Railroad, and the Old State Bank and its financial support was directly responsible for the success of the TC&D. The beginning of the TC&D Railroad, as a means to move supplies around the impassable Tennessee River, required an immense financial investment that required an institution to help support it.

<sup>15</sup>W. Warner Floyd, “State Bank Building, Decatur Branch” National Register of Historic Places Inventory/Nomination Form. Alabama Historical Commission, Montgomery, March 24, 1972.  
<sup>16</sup>Kenneth Johnson, “Some Aspects of Slavery in the Muscle Shoals Area.” The Journal of Muscle Shoals History. Vol II. 1974.  
<sup>17</sup>W. Warner Floyd, “State Bank Building, Decatur Branch” March 24, 1972.



The Dancy-Polk House circa 1935.

### 5 THE DANCY-POLK HOUSE

The Dancy-Polk House, originally built for Colonel William Francis Dancy in 1829, is one of the oldest standing structures in Decatur, and was present at the time of the Trail of Tears. William Francis Dancy later moved to St. Mary’s Parrish, Louisiana and sold the home to Mr. Jonas Wood.<sup>14</sup> Wood’s daughter, Lavinia, married Mr. Thomas Gilchrist Polk, a cousin of President James K. Polk, and resided in the house with their three daughters. Dancy-Polk House is located on the northwest corner of Railroad and Church Street and was situated so that it had a view of the Cherokee being loaded at the railroad depot and along the track the next morning for removal to Tuscumbia. It is not known whether Mr. or Mrs. Polk kept journals, or any sort of written record about the events of the Trail of Tears that would provide context to Decatur at the time of removal.

<sup>14</sup>Ellen Mertins and Doug Fuller, “Dancy-Polk House” National Register of Historic Places Inventory/Nomination Form. Alabama Historical Commission, Montgomery, February 28, 1980.



Decatur Railroad Depot circa 1864.

### 6 DECATUR RAILROAD DEPOT

After spending the night in the federal warehouses, the Native Americans being removed would be marched from Market Street to the Depot on Railroad Avenue where they would be loaded onto open train cars that carried them to Tuscumbia. The most detailed account is of the Ridge Party who claimed to be part of the “voluntary” removal, but many of the pro-treaty Cherokee in the party still wept upon leaving their homeland behind. A Moravian missionary present at the event states,

*It is mournful to see how reluctantly these people go away, even the stoutest hearts melt into tears when they turn their faces towards the setting sun – & I am sure that this land will be bedewed with a Nation’s tears – if not with their blood.... Major Ridge is.... said to be in a declining state, & it is doubted whether he will reach Arkansas.*<sup>12</sup>

A Local newspaper write-up corroborates the missionary and the atmosphere of the silent exchange between the Cherokee being removed and the citizens of Decatur that had come to see the spectacle:

*Many of them could be seen examining, with their peculiar inquisitive silence and gravity, this great enigma to them, while others, apparently uninterested and thoughtless, amused themselves with an old fiddle or sat motionless, gazing at those around. But a lively spirit seemed to animate the balance, with the exception of a few small children, who, though unable to speak a word of our language, as a bystander facetiously observed, ‘cried in very good English.’*<sup>13</sup>

It was in this sad disposition that half of the Ridge party left on the morning of March 8th, with the rest following on March 9th -10th. Two more parties of Cherokee were forcibly removed after refusing the terms

of the Treaty of New Echota. The events of their journey through Decatur were not detailed by an eyewitness like the Ridge Party, but reveal the process by which the Trail of Tears occurred in Decatur. Of the two parties that were forced to stay overnight, both were kept in the federal warehouses next door to the depot, and then escorted onto open train cars for the trip to Tuscumbia the following day.

### Other Sites to see in Decatur

#### 7 MORGAN COUNTY ARCHIVES

The Morgan County Archives was created in 1995 as the centerpiece of the new records management system that housed the records no longer useful for day-to-day operations. The Morgan County Archives houses: marriage records, wills, court proceedings, voter registration, census materials, maps, original bound volumes of the Decatur Daily, books on local history topics, genealogical materials, and an abundance of other local resources that provide a full picture of present-day Morgan County from 1818-2017. The Morgan County Archives also houses several rotating, and permanent, exhibits of history that allow visitors to see artifacts, and learn about Decatur through several lenses of history. Currently, visitors can experience Decatur during the Civil War with an interactive timeline that reveals the history of Decatur under Union and Confederate control with artifacts from the period. Visitors can also experience the trial of the Scottsboro Boys who were tried at the Morgan County Courthouse in a racially charged case that found all nine African American boys falsely accused of rape. The exhibit chronicles the trial and its outcome, and features actual courtroom furniture used in the trial.

The Morgan County Archives are housed in what was originally the Tennessee Valley Bank for Decatur. The Bank was first opened on June 2, 1927, and was built in a Greek Neo-classical style. The building was built using concrete, brick, steel, and Alabama Limestone, and was advertised as being “fireproof throughout”. The bank boasted a 17-ton circular vault that was visible to all who entered, which is now utilized to safeguard local history artifacts.

Visit the Morgan County Archives to learn more about Decatur and its peoples, but to also see primary sources and artifacts that pertain to the history of the town.



#### RECONSTRUCTED DECATUR DEPOT AND MUSEUM

8 The Decatur Railroad Depot Museum offers visitors the chance to experience how the TC&D Railroad impacted Alabama. It holds an exhibit that reveals the history of the TC&D Railroad on Decatur since its construction in the 1830s and its influence since. Visitors can see artifacts and memorabilia that would have been utilized in daily life along the railroad, and examine the actual materials utilized to build track that connected North Alabama like it had been unable to before. Along with memorabilia, you can examine a scale model train table of Decatur that features many landmark’s that the town is known for. Admission and guided tours are free to the public.



The removal of the Cherokee by way of Decatur was a clash of firsts and lasts. Many would never have seen a train before, but all would never return to their homeland. The behavior as noted by the newspaperman reveals that the captives aboard the train were terrified, desensitized, or anxious for whatever came at the end of the line.

<sup>12</sup>John Elle, Trail of Tears-The Rise and Fall of the Cherokee Nation, 363.

<sup>13</sup>Removing Cherokees, Morgan Observer, May 9, 1837.