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 those groups were forced to stay overnight in Decatur and travel by railroad to Tuscumbia where the river deepened. The Decatur Trail of Tears Walking Tour is a part of the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail.
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. 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 Tuscumbia 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. 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.

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. 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. 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.

5Edward Bos, “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 commemorated 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.
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. 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.”

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 from Decatur but, while traveling, it was reported that some who were left behind were sick. 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. 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. 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 Whitley was not required to house his party overnight.

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:

\[\text{from 3 o'clock til Sun Set the Indians continued setting up the open oars, waiting for the arrival of the Locomotive, the weather having become very cold, their condition was quite uncomfortable at length the order was given that the train would not start till morning. The Indians were immediately and anxiously engaged in selecting their bedding for the night. Upon realizing that they would not be able to move to Tuscumbia until the following day, the members of the Ridge party returned to the Warehouses, and attempted to make themselves comfortable for the night, but no comfort was found. Lillybridge details the conditions that the party endured for the night:} \]

no one had made his business to aid and direct the Indians, when they could 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

The Rhea-McEntire House in Decatur was used by the 102nd Ohio Regiment to care for the infirm. 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. 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. 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.
Dancy later moved to St. Mary’s Parrish, Louisiana and present at the time of the Trail of Tears. William Francis of the oldest standing structures in Decatur, and was Alabama Historical Commission, Montgomery, February 28, 1980.


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. Williams Francis Dancy later moved to St. Mary’s Parrish, Louisiana and sold the home to Mr. Jonas Wood. 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.

Removing Cherokees, Morgan Observer, May 9, 1837.

The behavior as noted by the newspaperman reveals that train before, but all would never return to their homeland. 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.

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 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 accessible to no one 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.

The Morgan County Archives 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 to build tracks that once ran from 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 landmarks that the town is known for. Admission and guided tours are free to the public.