

The Trail of Tears: Causes and Effects

By Jack Wooldridge

The Trail of Tears was such a horrible event that it mars the pride that people of the United States have for their country's past. In an act of ethnic cleansing, Georgian soldiers forced Cherokee farmers and homeowners off their land and told them to move out to their new homeland. How could this have happened? The simple answer would be to say that greed clouded the eyes of those who made the decision. But the truth is much more complicated than that.

It starts with the westward expansion of American settlers from 1800 to 1820. During this time, Louisiana, Florida, California, Nevada, Utah and parts of Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Wyoming were all settled. However, this prime land wasn't uninhabited. A large portion of the land was held by the Cherokee Nation, which shrank a lot during this time, from Cherokee landowners selling their land to American settlers. By the end of this period, the leaders of the Cherokee nation had made their decision: that no more land should be sold to the Americans.

The American settlers, especially those in the state of Georgia, who believed that the land belonging to the Cherokee should be part of their state, were unhappy about this. Because the population in the West had gone from primarily Native American to mostly white American, tensions between the Americans and the Cherokees increased, although they did not spark at this point. That would happen a little bit later.

During Thomas Jefferson's time as president, he had offered the Cherokee and other Indians a promise: become more like us, integrate into our culture and you will be treated equally as other citizens. Although many Cherokee continued their way of life, richer families began to dress and behave more like American settlers. They sent their children to American schools, so they could learn English and get a better education. However, despite this, racism was still prevalent, and the Cherokee were clearly not being treated the same as their white counterparts.

In 1819, General Andrew Jackson decided to punish the Creek tribe in Florida for harboring escaped slaves. He invaded Florida, pushing his way in and destroying several Spanish forts before attacking the Creeks. While some in Washington cried for Jackson's dismissal, President Adams decided to use the event to his advantage. Besides, the people (in general here) in the South were in full support of Jackson: he was a hero! He used the military presence they had in Florida to get the Spanish to sign the Adams-Onis Treaty, ceding Florida to the United States. And Andrew Jackson learned that persecuting the Native Americans was a good tactic for getting their land.

When President James Monroe created the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, he may or may not have been thinking of the Native Americans. But his policy affected them, in a big way. In the Monroe Doctrine, he wrote that any attempts by European powers to extend their political system to the Western Hemisphere would be seen as a threat to the nation's "peace and safety." This, knowingly or unknowingly, cut the Native Americans off from having European allies. Also, the Monroe Doctrine said, in a roundabout way,

that the land in America belonged to the United States, and no more colonization was allowed. This was a threat to the Cherokee Nation, which saw itself as a separate entity from the United States. Yet another bit of legislation which made them a little bit more vulnerable.

Finally, after this supporting history, we come to the reasons for the horrifying event. Andrew Jackson, the same man who had invaded Florida in 1819, was elected as president of the United States in 1824. Now, what I'm going to say next will sound pretty damning, but remember that Andrew Jackson, despite his narrow view of slavery and Native Americans, was a champion of democracy, individual liberty (for white Americans, of course) and the will of the people. Unfortunately, the will of the people at that time was that they wanted the Native Americans' land, by hook or by crook. Jackson was going to give them what they wanted.

Why did the people in the South and the West want this? For many years, American settlers had traveled west looking for land where they could build their future. But now, finally, they were coming up against barriers to expansion: the Native Americans. These settlers didn't just want the land to live on: with new inventions like the Cotton Gin, the land could be efficiently farmed for cotton. Add to that the fact that gold was being found under the Cherokee Nation, and the settlers wanted it really badly. Legally, of course, they couldn't just take it. That needed to change before the land could be taken away.

Back to the Cherokee: John Ross, their current leader, was feeling threatened on all sides. The State of Georgia wanted their land, the Jackson administration had passed The Indian Removal act, and cases of settlers just stealing land from the Cherokee continued. He first attempted to fight the law legally, getting a lawsuit into the supreme court. John Marshall, the Supreme Court Judge, ruled that the Cherokee nation was its own entity and State or Federal laws could not affect it. Georgia kept on with their efforts anyway. President Jackson supposedly said "*John Marshall has made his decision; now let him enforce it! ... Build a fire under them. When it gets hot enough, they'll go.*"

A treaty to sell their land and relocate was signed by a family of rich Cherokee landowners, the Ridges, who had been voted out of the Council and had no power to sign away land. They and a small number of the Cherokee people left to go to Oklahoma, their new homeland. It wasn't Jackson but the president after him, Martin Van Buren, who imposed the treaty. An armed force of around 7,000 federal and state troops rounded up everyone still in the Cherokee Nation, around 13,000 people, and placed them in concentration camps. Dozen died in the rain and the cold, and many people were sleeping on the muddy ground with an inadequate tents to keep the rain off them. John Ross did everything he could to stop this from happening, and afterwards convinced the troops to let them stay until the fall, when the journey to their "new homeland", further west, would be easier.

No one could have predicted that that winter would have been the harshest in recent memory. As the 13,000 Cherokee people made a forced march west, dozens died every day. Over a quarter of them died before the made it. Truly, this is a stain on the honor of

the United States. That such a thing could ever have happened here shocks me.

In their new homeland, tempers flared. The Ridges were brutally murdered for betraying their people and signing a treaty with the United States, and so the Cherokee lost a valuable group of people who could have helped them recover. But things gradually began to get better. There was land to grow food on, places to hunt, space to expand. Slowly, the Cherokee began to get some of their pride back. Their culture flourished... at least until the United States, which had expanded enough to catch up with them, tried to force them from their land once again..

Sources:

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