

2011 Georgia History Festival Featured Historical Figure Teacher Guide

Sequoyah

(also called George Gist or George Guest)

(c.1760 - c. 1840)



Henry Inman's copy (lithograph) of Charles Byrd King's original portrait of Sequoyah as it appears in McKenney and Hall's, *The Indian Tribes of North America*. Edinburgh : J. Grant, 1933-3. From the Georgia Historical Society Rare Collection.

Explanation: The Sequoyah teacher guide includes all the text from the online resources with bolded vocabulary terms and their definitions (page 1-9). The packet also includes suggested resources specifically for educators (pages 9-10) and a list of GPS standards aligned to the resources (12-13).

Brief Biography

Sequoyah, credited as the creator of the Cherokee syllabary, was born approximately 250 years ago in a small village in present-day East Tennessee, approximately 8 miles from Echota, the old capital of the Cherokee Nation. He was the son of a Cherokee mother, Wu-te-he of the Red Paint Clan, and a white father - possibly Nathaniel Gist, a commissioned officer in the Continental army and emissary of George Washington. Throughout his life, Sequoyah remained faithful to the traditions of the Cherokee people, never adopting white dress, religion, or other customs. He spoke Cherokee exclusively.

In the 1790s, Sequoyah resettled in what is now Arkansas when tribal land along the Tennessee River was ceded to whites. He worked for many years as a trader and later became a silversmith as well as a blacksmith. During the War of 1812, Sequoyah and other Cherokees enlisted on the side of the United States under General Andrew Jackson to fight British troops and the Creek Indians. In 1815, Sequoyah married Sally Waters, a Cherokee woman of the Bird Clan, and began his family.

Sequoyah, intrigued by the whites' ability to communicate through writing, worked for 12 years to create a system of approximately eighty-six characters that represented syllables in spoken Cherokee. The first to read and write in Cherokee was Sequoyah's daughter, A-Yo-Ka. Once the

Cherokee officially adopted his syllabary, a large part of the Nation achieved literacy in a very short time. Sequoyah is credited by the Cherokee Nation as having gifted them with the ability to communicate across long distances and throughout the ages by preserving the tribe's history, culture, and spiritual practices through the written word.

Following the adoption of his syllabary by the Cherokee, Sequoyah continued to work for the benefit of his people, traveling to Washington, D.C. to help negotiate treaties and aid displaced Cherokees. Dedicated to uniting the scattered Cherokee Nation, he died around 1840 traveling in Texas and Mexico attempting to locate communities of Cherokee believed to be living in that area. His burial site is unknown.

From 1828 to 1834, the Cherokee Phoenix, a newspaper published in New Echota, Georgia (the former capital of the eastern Cherokees), printed articles using the Cherokee syllabary. The newspaper publication along with the organized government of the Cherokee Nation (which included a tribal council and supreme court) infuriated state officials. Tensions heightened when gold was discovered in Cherokee territory in North Georgia. Gold speculators began trespassing on their lands, and increasing pressure was placed on the Georgia government to remove the Cherokee.

Finally in 1838, after years of negotiations and work by tribal leaders including Sequoyah to retain their land, the Cherokee were forcibly removed from Georgia. The long journey to reserved lands in Oklahoma, during which an estimated 4,000 people died from hunger, exposure, and disease is remembered by the Cherokee and other removed tribes as the "trail where they cried" or the "Trail of Tears."

When the Cherokees were removed, their buildings and printing press at New Echota were destroyed, and the type for Sequoyah's syllabary was dumped in a well that was then sealed. Excavations in the 1950s led to partial restoration of the Cherokee capital, and the New Echota State Historic Site near Calhoun includes reconstructions of the Cherokee town buildings.

The Georgia Historical Society is pleased to honor and interpret the life and contributions of Sequoyah and the role he played in Georgia history in recognition of the 250th anniversary of his birth.

Taking Leaves

Cherokee Alphabet.									
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interested with the idea and began working on a Cherokee writing system.

However, his work was postponed by the War of 1812. On October 7, 1813, he, like many other Cherokee, enlisted with the U.S. Army and shortly after fought in the battle of Tallaschatche. On March 27, 1814, he fought with Andrew Jackson in **Battle of Horseshoe Bend**. He was discharged in April 1814. Life with the U.S. Army provided Sequoyah even more opportunities to see soldiers' system of writing in action, and made him even more determined to develop such a system for his own people.

In 1815, he married Sally Waters, daughter of Robert and Lydia Otterlifter of the Bird clan. Together, Sequoyah and Sally had a little girl name Ayoka (other spellings include Ahyokeh). Sequoyah continued his writing project, teaching his daughter the symbols and sounds. He eventually created 86 different characters, inspired by Roman and Greek letters and his own inventiveness.

Initially, many Cherokees disapproved of the writing system. To help demonstrate the effectiveness of the written language, Sequoyah often used Ayoka to show that the ideas of one person could be written down and transmitted (with no other means of communication) to another.



Cherokee Phoenix masthead, courtesy [New Echota State Historic Site](#)

By 1825 the Cherokee Nation had adopted Sequoyah's syllabary. Once adopted the writing system spread rapidly, leading to an exceptionally high **literacy** rate among the Cherokee in a very short period of time.

In 1828, the first newspaper of the Cherokees, the *Cherokee Phoenix* was launched at New Echota, Georgia. The newspaper was printed in two columns, one in English and the other in Cherokee. The *Cherokee Phoenix* published the rights and grievances of the Cherokee people before American society. It also printed passages from the Bible, news, and advertisements.

The Cherokee writing system was crucial in preserving the Cherokee history, culture and spiritual beliefs. The Cherokee Nation describes Sequoyah's contributions as follows:

he accomplished a feat, which no other person in history has done single-handedly...he brought our people literacy and a gift of communicating through long distances and ages. This one person brought to his people this great gift without hired educators, no books and no cost.

Vocabulary

- **Oral Communication:** communication through mouth. Individuals conversing with each other.
- **Skepticism:** a doubting attitude
- **Battle of Horseshoe Bend:** The Battle of Horseshoe Bend occurred on March 27, 1814, during the Creek War.
- **Literacy:** the ability to read and write to a competent level

Early Life

Birth and Family

Sequoyah (pronounced in Cherokee, S-si-quo-ya) is credited as the first person in history to create a written language alone and without being literate in another language. He is known as the creator of the Cherokee **syllabary**, a list of syllables representing unique sounds in the spoken Cherokee language. Although his contributions to Cherokee, Georgia, and American history are well-known and widely acknowledged, little is known about much of the life (particularly the early life) of this famous man.

The best estimation for his birth is between 1760 and 1776 – approximately 250 years ago. He was born in the Cherokee town of Tuskegee, pronounced “Tasgigi” or “Taskigi by the Cherokee people. It is located in present-day East Tennessee just a few miles from Echota, the former capital of the Cherokee Nation. His mother, Wu-te-he (other spellings Wurteh or Wut-teh) was Cherokee and belonged to the Red Paint **clan**, one of the seven Cherokee clans.

Information about his father is more ambiguous. Some sources claim his father as Nathaniel Gist (or Guest), who may have been an associate of President George Washington and a Virginia diplomat and soldier, or a Dutch or German peddler. One story claims that Gist rescued President Washington from drowning and that he (Gist) lived among the Cherokees from the mid-eighteenth century. According to the Cherokee Nation, Gist was also a descendent of the Blair family of Washington, DC. As an adult, Sequoyah used the English name George Gist (sometimes Guess or Guest). While his exact identity remains a mystery, it is evident that Sequoyah’s father either abandoned his family or died while Sequoyah was an infant, leaving him exclusively in the care of his Cherokee mother.

Sequoyah was part of an important family among the Cherokee. According to the Cherokee Nation, Wu-te-he had five brothers who were distinguished chiefs in the latter part of the eighteenth century. These family connections were important for Sequoyah as Cherokee tradition recognizes the importance of the **maternal** lineage. In fact, children often received training and socialization from their mothers’ brothers. Wu-te-he’s brothers were named John Jolly, Old Tassel, Tahlonteskee, Pumpkin Boy, and Doublehead. Pumpkin Boy, Tahlonteskee, and Doublehead were known for their opposition to white settlement in Cherokee land. Sequoyah also had two brothers named Tobacco Will and Dutch (U-ge-we-le-dv). Tobacco Will was a blacksmith and a signer of Cherokee Constitution and Dutch was an important chief.

Cherokee Childhood and Youth



1764 Map of the Southern Indian District. From the Georgia Historical Society Map Collection, MS 1361-MP 347

Before the training and socialization years, Sequoyah, like other small children, would have spent his first years with his mother. Cherokee men and women shared labor. Typically, men were responsible for hunting, defense, and fishing while women worked in the fields and turned raw goods into finished products. As women tended their daily tasks, they often placed their babies in cradleboards. These wooden cradleboards included fastened pouches of animal hide that kept babies warm and secure. Women hung the cradleboards on tree branches as they worked outside, allowing babies to sleep or observe the world around them. When Sequoyah became older, he would have joined his mother in labor participating in tending, gardening, hoeing and harvesting crops. Wu-te-he owned horses and she taught Sequoyah how to care for them.

In an excerpt from, *Sequoyah: Inventor of the Cherokee Alphabet* author Jane Shumate describes Sequoyah as an ingenious boy,

He was an inventive boy and often amused himself or made his tasks easier by creating things. As a small child he made little houses of sticks in the forest, but when he was older, he constructed various milking devices for his mother and a small wooden house over a stream to keep the cows' milk cold. He also carved animals out of wood and drew pictures of animals and people, mixing colors out of crushed bark, berries and leaves (Shumate 38, 39).

After acquiring skills from his mother, Sequoyah would have begun defense training around the age of fifteen. He, like other Cherokee boys and some girls, acquired war skills and rigorous training. He learned to subject his body to pain, while witnessing others doing the same. Patience became a virtue as he also endured periods of hunger. Sequoyah was taught how to use the bow and arrow, the spear, and the tomahawk. Sitting in the woods or near a river for several days, he would listen quietly to the sound of animals and observe their behavior.

When he was mature enough, he joined the older men in hunting. He learned their rituals of cleansing morning and evening in the river, praying and pardoning his actions of killing deer by apologizing to the souls of the deer. Another method of training was a violent, fast-paced ball game similar to lacrosse. Not only was this game popular among Cherokees but also among other Native Americans in the region. A purification process of abstinence, dancing and ritual cleansing often preceded the ball game. The body was afflicted with 300 bleeding lines using thorns and quills, then men and boys purified themselves by jumping into the river. Young Cherokee men were praised for their performing skills, endurance, speed, and strength.

Physical Limitations

At some point, Sequoyah developed lameness in one of his legs, causing him to limp throughout the rest of his life. Some sources attribute his lameness to an illness like polio, or to a hunting accident. According to the Cherokee Nation, an account in the *Cherokee Advocate* (June 26, 1845) states that “he was the victim of hydro arthritic trouble of the knee joint, commonly called ‘white swelling’, and this affliction caused a lameness that characterized him during life.” It is believed because of his lameness, he acquired interest in trade, the occupation of his mother. After her death in 1800, he continued her business and became a successful silversmith and blacksmith. Sequoyah made his own tools and constructed his own forge ([Cherokee Nation](#)).

Vocabulary

- **Syllabary:** list of characters representing syllables
- **Clan:** a group of families related through a common ancestor or marriage
- **Maternal:** relating to or inherited from the mother or the mother's side of a family

Cherokee Before and After the American Revolution

The Cherokee Before the American Revolution

The Cherokee Nation has roots in this country that extend thousands of years into the past. However, as with most Native tribes, what we may have learned in school about their origins, or even the name or names with which they refer to themselves, may be very different from either the history or even the name(s) they would have claimed for themselves. According to the Cherokee Nation, the Cherokees refer to themselves as “Aniyvwiya” meaning the “Real People” or the “Anigaduwaigi” or the Kituwah people. Other Native American tribes such as the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Huron, Catawba and Iroquois describe them differently: Choctaw and Chickasaw knew them as Chilukki, the dog people; Huron knew them as Entarironnen, the mountain people; Catawba referred to them as Madera or Manteran, meaning coming out of the ground; and Iroquois called them Oyatageroneon, Oyaudah, or Uwatayoronon, the cave people.

When European settlers arrived, they too had their own description of the Cherokee people. The Spanish referred to them as Chalaque. The French description is similar to the Choctaw and Chickasaw descriptions, referring to them as Nation du Chien (Nation of dogs). The term “Cherokee” is an English word that is translated Tsalagi or Anitsalagi in the Cherokee language.

The “Real People” first encountered the “New Comers” in the 1540 Spanish Expedition of Hernando de Soto. Following that expedition, the Cherokee began to experience significant depopulation due largely to disease. In fact, by the time of Sequoyah’s birth in the 1760s the population of the Cherokee had decreased dramatically from approximately 35,000 at the end of the seventeenth century, to around 7,000 – a decline due in large part to wave after wave of European diseases against which the Native Americans had no immunity. Throughout Native America, disease was the most deadly weapon of the Europeans. To learn more about the potent effects of European diseases, read Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs and Steel*.

In 1673, English settlers came to Echota, in present-day East Tennessee, a capital town of the Cherokee wanting to establish trade relations. European goods of brass kettles, textiles, scissors and knives, guns and ammunition, metal hatchets and hoes and trinkets were exchanged for native deerskins, beeswax and river cane baskets. Deerskins were in great demand in England to make leather goods and products. Gradually, trade negotiations and intermarriage with members of the tribe permitted English settlers to establish themselves in Cherokee villages.



1766 Map of the Indian Nations
From the Collection of the Georgia Historical Society

Peace **treaties** between the English and Cherokee were developed early as well. In 1730, the Cherokee made an alliance with the English by pledging their allegiance to the British Crown, King George the Second, and promising to trade with the English only. Other European settlers were making alliances with other Native American tribes. The English needed special protection from their greatest rival, the French.

Other **negotiations** sought Cherokee land. By that time, Cherokee territory had been firmly established in the Appalachian region of the southeastern United States encompassing territory that included parts of modern North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama, and Georgia. However, in the years directly leading up to American independence large sections of territory were given up by the Cherokee, reducing their territorial holdings by half through negotiations in nearly ten different treaties between 1721 and 1777.

The Cherokee in the New Republic



Secretary of War Henry Knox
From the U.S. Senate Collection

From the earliest days of American independence, relations with Native American tribes had been a primary concern for national security. One of the most influential individuals in shaping Indian policy by new United States government was Henry Knox, Secretary of War under the **Articles of Confederation** government as well as for a time under President George Washington. He believed that “civilizing” or **assimilating** the tribes would provide the best path to lasting peace.

His view of civilization meant that Native Americans would become small farmers, giving up hunting (and the vast lands needed to maintain the lifestyle that accompanies it) and developing established, permanent villages. He felt they should adopt European dress and family life (living in **nuclear families**), learn to speak English, and convert to Christianity. Knox’s plans for this transition in tribal life, he felt, would make possible the eventual sale of land to American settlers as the Indians would wish to develop their farms and villages using money gained through the sale of now unnecessary hunting lands. Knox was likely very optimistic about future relations with the Cherokee as they had been a primarily agricultural society for hundreds of years before Europeans ever came to North America.

Christian missionaries also participated in the “civilizing” of the Cherokee. These included a number of Moravian missionaries who worked in towns and villages throughout North Georgia – including New Echota. Missionaries taught reading, writing, arithmetic, housekeeping, personal grooming, table etiquette and other topics deemed necessary for civilization. They discouraged them from any “heathen” activities such as the violent ball games so much a part of Cherokee culture. As was to be expected, the Cherokee generally accepted ideas they considered helpful and rejected those that seemed useless.

In fact it was one of these “compromises” that helped establish the first Cherokee newspaper, the *Cherokee Phoenix*. The missionaries, as well as the Cherokee saw the creation of the Cherokee syllabary as a gift and, by 1825, much of the Bible and numerous hymns had been translated into Cherokee.

Wishing to use their newly developed written language to further their own cultural and political goals, the Cherokee of New Echota were willing to let the missionaries purchase the type and press for the newspaper and to print scripture in the paper alongside other items of tribal news.

Though early agreements with the United States, like the Treaty of Hopewell in 1785, seemed to provide protection to the Cherokee against further encroachment into their land, it soon became apparent that the new “American” settlers were no more willing to halt their territorial expansion than the “English” settlers before them. Deep and lasting divisions emerged within the Cherokee leadership and among the tribe itself about how to respond to the ongoing efforts of the new settlers. Some advocated for negotiation and assimilation. Others fought diplomacy at every

turn. The most strident in their opposition to further negotiations with the Americans were the Chickamaugas, a group of Cherokee mainly from modern northeastern Alabama who fought all negotiation with the Americans until the mid-1790s.

These divisions within the Cherokee Nation continued throughout the lifetime of Sequoyah and even beyond. By the early 1800s, the Cherokee had continued to lose land in the east, causing many (including Sequoyah and his family) to relocate to reserved and (temporarily) undisputed lands further west. Distance could only intensify these internal divisions as two separate nations – east and west – began to develop within the Cherokee.

Vocabulary

- **Treaties:** formal contracts or agreements negotiated between countries or other political entities
- **Negotiations:** the reaching of agreement through discussion and compromise
- **Articles of Confederation (American and Cherokee):**
 - The Continental Congress adopted the Articles of Confederation, the first constitution of the United States, on November 15, 1777. However, ratification of the Articles of Confederation by all thirteen states did not occur until March 1, 1781. The Articles created a loose confederation of sovereign states and a weak central government, leaving most of the power with the state governments
 - In 1817, the Cherokees created their first constitution, the Articles of Confederation. It outlined the election of Committee members and the unanimous decision power of the Cherokee Nation.
- **Assimilating or Assimilation:** the process in which one group takes on the cultural and other traits of a larger group
- **Nuclear Families:** a social unit that consists of a mother, a father, and their children.

From the [National Endowment for the Humanities Education Website](#):

Geared toward older (middle and high school) students, [this is a full lesson-plan](#) , entitled “Traditions and Languages of Three Native Cultures: Tlingit, Lakota, & **Cherokee**.” It includes Guiding Questions, Learning Objectives, Preparation Instructions, Lesson Activities, and Extending the Lesson.

Activity 4 on this lesson plan specifically deals with traditions and language of the Cherokee. It includes a link to the Cherokee syllabary as well as a link to a Cherokee-English dictionary and Cherokee word chart. A link to www.nativeweb.org provides more information on Sequoyah and the Cherokee syllabary.

The lesson plan also includes two activity worksheets on languages of Native Americans.

Also from NEH, [this lesson-plan](#) is entitled “Native American Cultures Across the US” and is geared toward children in **grades K-2**. It also includes Guiding Questions, Learning Objectives, Preparation Instructions, Lesson Activities, and Extending the Lesson.

Also included is an Activity Worksheet on Native American cultures across the US.

From [Education World](#):

[This lesson plan](#) brings to life the story of the Trail of Tears and the Cherokee Nation in the 1830s. It is geared towards **grades 6-8** and **9-12**. It includes a description of the lesson, materials needed, and an assessment.

From [the National Park Service](#):

The National Park Service has a lesson entitled “[The Trail of Tears and the Forced Relocation of the Cherokee Nation](#).” Click on “[About This Lesson](#),” for Objectives for Students, Materials for Students, and “where it fits into the curriculum.”

The “[Setting the Stage](#)” category gives contextual information on the Cherokee. It also provides Maps, Readings, Visual Evidence/Images, and an Activities Section. It concludes with a Supplementary Resources section.

From [Teachervision.com](#):

This website has a lesson plan entitled “[Sequoyah and his Syllabary](#)” intended for Grade levels 2-5. The lesson includes an introductory/information section on Sequoyah and his syllabary, as well as suggested activities involving the Cherokee Alphabet (a chart of the alphabet is given).

From [History.org](#):

This website gives another suggested [lesson on Sequoyah and the Cherokee language](#) . This lesson will model the evolution of the Cherokee language from oral to written. It suggests that in the first part of the lesson, the teacher tells the story of Sequoyah and his creation of the Cherokee syllabary in an interactive style. In the second part of the lesson, the students recreate the story in written form using "talking leaves."

From the [Library of Congress](#):

The Library of Congress website includes primary source materials as well as other resources for educators. Topics include Cherokee [treaties](#) and [land cessions](#) , as well as the 1830 [Indian Removal Act](#) .

Georgia Performance Standards Correlations

Grade 2

Historical Understandings

SS2H1 The student will read about and describe the lives of historical figures in Georgia history.

- a. Identify the contributions made by these historic figures: James Oglethorpe, Tomochichi, and Mary Musgrove (founding of Georgia); **Sequoyah (development of a Cherokee alphabet)**; Jackie Robinson (sports); Martin Luther King, Jr. (civil rights); Jimmy Carter (leadership and human rights).
- b. Describe how everyday life of these historical figures is similar to and different from everyday life in the present (food, clothing, homes, transportation, communication, recreation, rights, and freedoms).

SS2H2 The student will describe the Georgia Creek and Cherokee cultures of the past in terms of tools, clothing, homes, ways of making a living, and accomplishments.

- a. Describe the regions in Georgia where the Creeks and Cherokees lived and how the people used their local resources.
- b. Compare and contrast the Georgia Creek and Cherokee cultures of the past to Georgians today.

Geographic Understandings

SS2G2 The student will describe the cultural and geographic systems associated with the historical figures in **SS2H1** and Georgia's Creeks and Cherokees.

- a. Identify specific locations significant to the life and times of each historic figure on a political map.
- b. Describe how place (physical and human characteristics) had an impact on the lives of each historic figure.
- c. Describe how each historic figure adapted to and was influenced by his/her environment.
- d. Trace examples of travel and movement of these historic figures and their ideas across time.
- e. Describe how the region in which these historic figures lived affected their lives and compare these regions to the region in which the students live.

Government/Civic Understandings

SS2CG3 The student will give examples of how the historical figures under study demonstrate the positive citizenship traits of honesty, dependability, liberty, trustworthiness, honor, civility, good sportsmanship, patience, and compassion.

Grade 3

Government/Civic Understandings

SS3CG2 The student will discuss the character of different historical figures

- a. Describe how the different historical figures display positive character traits of cooperation, diligence, courage, and leadership.
- b. Explain how the historical figures used positive character traits to support their beliefs in liberty, justice, tolerance, and freedom of conscience and expression.

- c. Explain how the historical figures chose when to respect and accept authority.

Grade 4

Historical Understandings

SS4H1 The student will describe how early Native American cultures developed in North America.

- a. Locate where Native Americans settled.
- b. Describe how Native Americans used their environment to obtain food, clothing, and shelter.

SS4H6 The student will explain westward expansion of America between 1801 and 1861.

- a. Describe territorial expansion with emphasis on the Louisiana Purchase, the Lewis and Clark expedition, and the acquisitions of Texas (the Alamo and independence), Oregon (Oregon Trail), and California (Gold Rush and the development of mining towns).
- b. Describe the impact of the steamboat, the steam locomotive, and the telegraph on life in America.
- c. Describe the impact of westward expansion on Native Americans.

Grade 8

Historical Understandings

SS8H1 The student will evaluate the development of Native American cultures and the impact of European exploration and settlement on the Native American cultures in Georgia.

- a. Describe the evolution of Native American cultures (Paleo, Archaic, Woodland, and Mississippian) prior to European contact.
- b. Evaluate the impact of European contact on Native American cultures; include Spanish missions along the barrier islands, and the explorations of Hernando DeSoto.
- c. Explain reasons for European exploration and settlement of North America, with emphasis on the interests of the French, Spanish, and British in the southeastern area.

SS8H5 The student will explain significant factors that affected the development of Georgia as part of the growth of the United States between 1789 and 1840.

- a. Explain the establishment of the University of Georgia, Louisville, and the spread of Baptist and Methodist churches.
- b. Evaluate the impact of land policies pursued by Georgia; include the headright system, land lotteries, and the Yazoo land fraud.
- c. Explain how technological developments, including the cotton gin and railroads, had an impact on Georgia's growth.
- d. Analyze the events that led to the removal of Creeks and Cherokees; include the roles of Alexander McGillivray, William McIntosh, Sequoyah, John Ross, Dahlonega Gold Rush, Worcester v. Georgia, Andrew Jackson, John Marshall, and the Trail of Tears.