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Talking with historian Gary Moulton

The Georgia History Festival kicks off with a talk by Moulton about the Cherokee in GA

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The Georgia History Festival kicks off next week with a talk by prominent historian Gary Moulton. He'll discuss the internal and external struggles of the Cherokee nation in the early part of the 19th Century that culminated with the Trail of Tears.

The talk will also touch on the significance of one this year's History Festival honorees, Sequoyah, who created the syllabary that was the foundation of the Cherokees' written language.

We had the pleasure of speaking with Moulton last week to discuss the Cherokee, the Georgia Gold Rush, and how even at its unseasonably coldest, Savannah is still nicer than Nebraska (where he lives) in the



MULTIMEDIA



wintertime.

For the first half of the 19th Century, leading up to the Trail of Tears, how big is the Cherokee Nation at that point?

Gary Moulton: At its height, probably 20,000 people or more, and they spread over a territory that encompasses parts of several states: Alabama, North Carolina, Tennessee and Georgia. They didn't fill it with the sort of population we think of today, but they did have an incredibly large territory and they were a very influential tribe. Through linguistic studies, we know Cherokee weren't original inhabitants of that territory, but by the time of the American Revolution and English colonization, the Cherokee were well established there.

One hundred odd years and a few generations after landing in the New World are the American settlers just more brazen? What led to the shift from co-habitation to land grabbing?

Gary Moulton: It's a power struggle for one thing. Can we have an independent Indian government set alongside the American government? Who will determine the destiny of those people in a particular state? Is it going to be the state itself or is it going to be the federal government? The issue of states rights gets caught up in this as well.

The Cherokees had the misfortune of having gold discovered on their land and that made it even worse for their future. People wanted that land and that gold. The state of Georgia began selling off gold certificates, land portions, to their citizens. It was a grand lottery to get land that potentially had gold on it. They disregarded Indian land ownership and rights.

They simply went in and took over.

What's the significance of Sequoyah and the Cherokee syllabary?

Gary Moulton: Among the Cherokee there was an internal struggle between the full bloods and the mixed bloods. These mixed bloods saw themselves as accommodating to the American way. This was partly the result of Sequoyah and the ability of Cherokee to become literate. A Cherokee could learn to read and write in three or four days. We take years to learn to read and write, but if a Cherokee could speak the language, he could learn these 87 syllables and that would take care of him. Once you memorized those syllables, it was very easy to read and write. They formed a newspaper, the Cherokee Phoenix, which had news in English and Cherokee. They formed a Constitutional government with a court system, a principle Chief and a two house legislature. They had a school system. Among the Cherokee, there was one faction that said we're going too far, too fast, and we need to keep the old ways. This is where the internal split is and what got them in trouble signing a treaty with the American government to allow removal. It was fraudulently made by a minority of the group, but it was still accepted by the federal government. It bound them to yield their lands and move out of Georgia and the other states.

Georgia History Festival Kickoff Lecture with Gary Moulton

When: Feb. 3, 7 p.m.

Where: Trinity United Methodist Church, 225 W. President St.



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