



GEORGIA  
HISTORY FESTIVAL

# SEQUOYAH

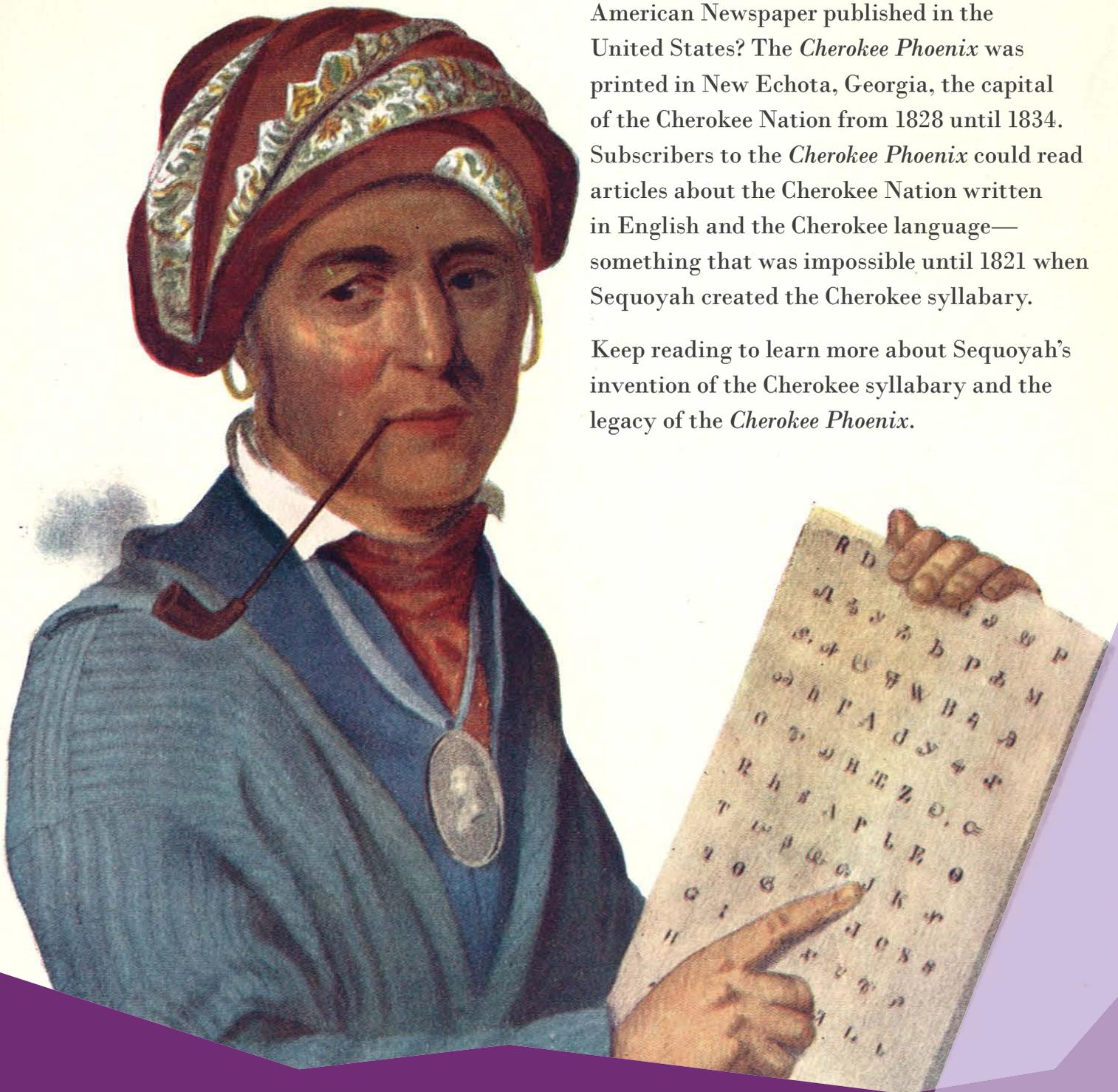
*Innovative Creator of the  
Cherokee Syllabary*



## DID YOU KNOW...

that Georgia was home to the first Native American Newspaper published in the United States? The *Cherokee Phoenix* was printed in New Echota, Georgia, the capital of the Cherokee Nation from 1828 until 1834. Subscribers to the *Cherokee Phoenix* could read articles about the Cherokee Nation written in English and the Cherokee language—something that was impossible until 1821 when Sequoyah created the Cherokee syllabary.

Keep reading to learn more about Sequoyah's invention of the Cherokee syllabary and the legacy of the *Cherokee Phoenix*.



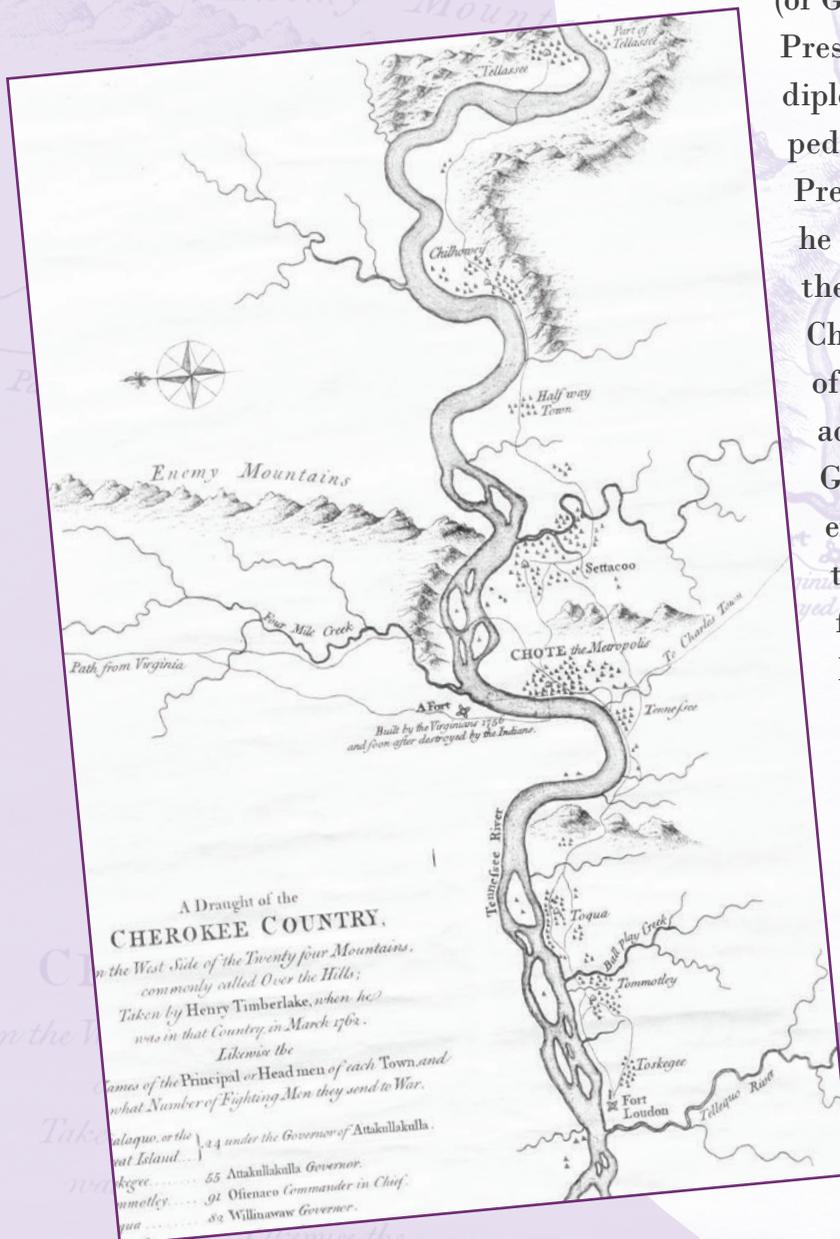
HENRY INMAN'S LITHOGRAPH OF CHARLES BYRD KING'S ORIGINAL PORTRAIT OF SEQUOYAH IN *THE INDIAN TRIBES OF NORTH AMERICA* BY MCKENNEY AND HALL. FROM THE GEORGIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY RARE COLLECTION.

# EARLY LIFE

Sequoyah (pronounced in Cherokee, S-si-quo-ya) has been 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 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. 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.

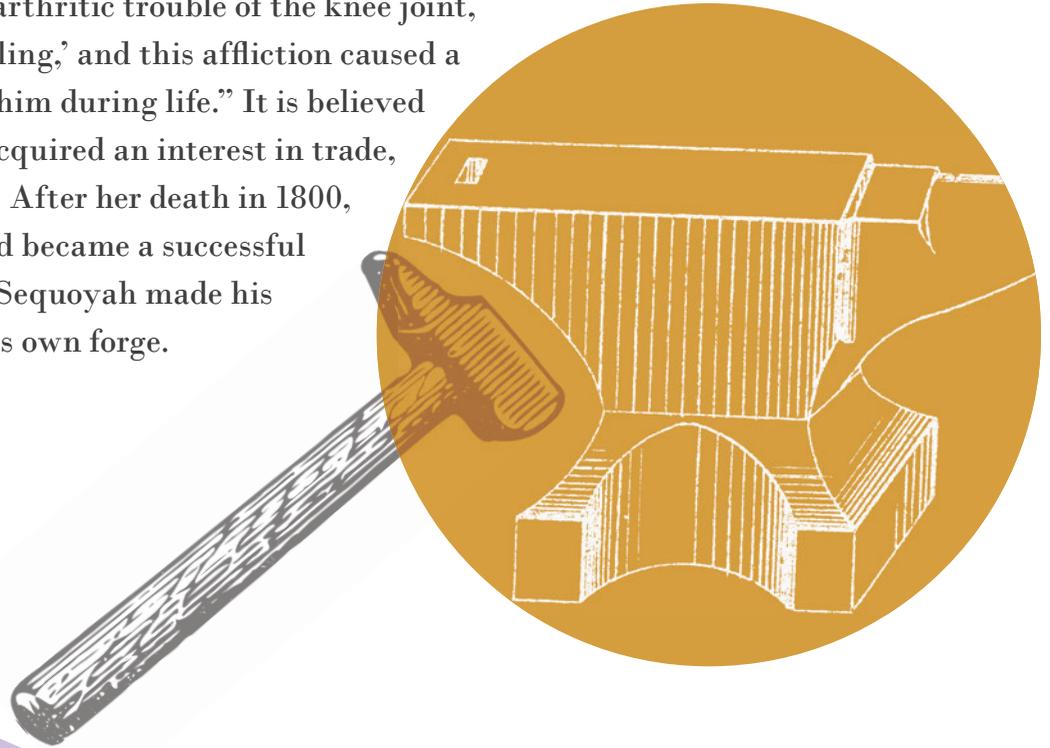
Information about his father is more uncertain. Some sources claim his father as Nathaniel Gist (or Guest), who may have been an associate of President George Washington and a Virginia diplomat and soldier, or a Dutch or German peddler. One story claims that Gist rescued President Washington from drowning and that he (Gist) lived among the Cherokees during the mid-eighteenth century. According to the Cherokee Nation, Gist was also a descendant of the Blair family of Washington, D.C. 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.



A DRAUGHT OF THE CHEROKEE COUNTRY, 1762. FROM THE GEORGIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY MAP COLLECTION, MS1361-MP.

# 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 an 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.



# INVENTING THE CHEROKEE SYLLABARY

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 also later became a silversmith as well as a blacksmith. Around 1809, nine years after his mother’s death, Sequoyah began to notice and to ponder the communications of white settlers. He realized that they were able to transmit thoughts over great distances by writing down their words and ideas. In discussions with other Cherokees on this subject, he noted that many disapproved of the idea of writing down one’s thoughts. Oral communication had always been the tradition among the Cherokee and they perceived the idea of written language as witchcraft. Despite his friends’ skepticism, he grew more interested in 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 the Battle of Horseshoe Bend. He was discharged in April 1814. Life with the U.S. Army provided Sequoyah 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 named 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.

By 1821, 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.

Following the adoption of his syllabary by the National Council, 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.

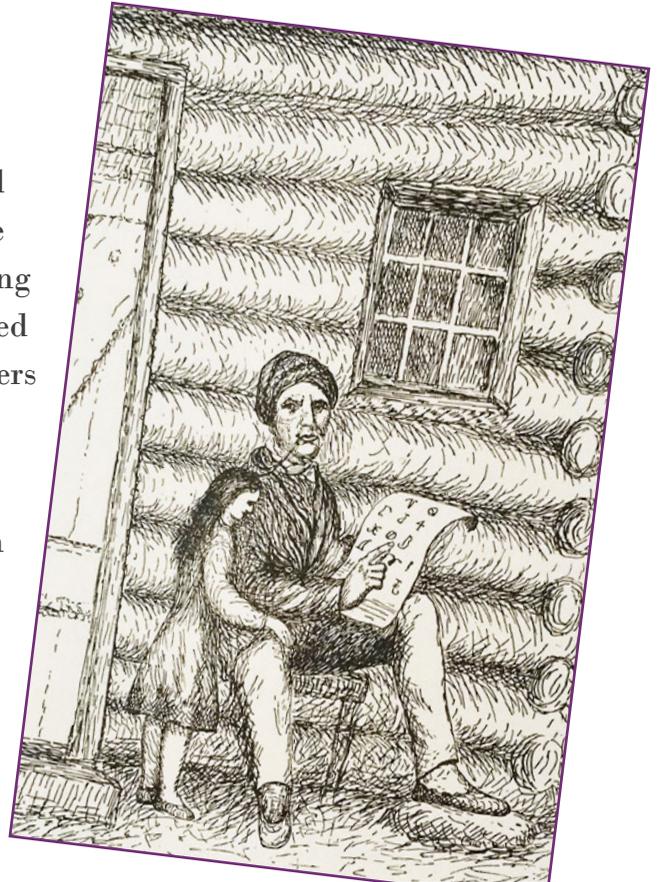


ILLUSTRATION OF SEQUOYAH AND DAUGHTER AYOKA BY C.S. ROBBINS IN *SE-QUO-YAH, THE AMERICAN CADMUS AND MODERN MOSES...* BY GEO. E. FOSTER. FROM THE GEORGIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY RARE COLLECTION.



BRONZE STATUE OF SEQUOYA BY VINNIE REAM IN THE NATIONAL STATUARY HALL. ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL.

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CHEROKEE

PHENIX.

VOL. I.

NEW ECHOTA, THURSDAY MARCH 13, 1828.

NO. 4.

# THE CHEROKEE NATION'S INNOVATIVE PUBLICATION

## “CIVILIZING THE CHEROKEE”

By the end of the eighteenth century, the Cherokee people in the East were forming into a centralized government. Affairs were no longer executed at the clan level. They began to concentrate on an agenda that protected their homeland. For example, in the 1790s, a decision was made by the National Council to create the Light Horse Guard, a Cherokee police force. In 1805, the National Council also ratified the Treaty of Tellico Block House. It authorized the construction of a road that stretched from the Chattahoochee River to the Tennessee River. Many Cherokees perceived the efforts of their National Council as a positive force consolidating its people and their homeland.

Under the leadership of men like John Ross, Major Ridge, his son John Ridge, and Elias Boudinot, the Cherokee were encouraged to assimilate in order to prove to the United States they were “civilized” enough to remain in their homeland.

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



HENRY INMAN'S LITHOGRAPH OF CHARLES BYRD KING'S ORIGINAL PORTRAITS OF JOHN ROSS (LEFT) AND MAJOR RIDGE (RIGHT) IN *THE INDIAN TRIBES OF NORTH AMERICA* BY MCKENNEY AND HALL. FROM THE GEORGIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY RARE COLLECTION.

was to be expected, the Cherokee generally accepted ideas they considered helpful and rejected those that seemed useless.

## NEW ECHOTA

In 1824, the Cherokee capital was moved to the northwest Georgia town of New Echota. The old capital at Echota, Tennessee, had suffered dramatically from war and raids. New Echota was defined by signs of the modern, civilized, and assimilated society of the Cherokee. The new capital had a two-story council house with glass windows and brick chimneys. It included wide streets with large, frame houses and signs of trade and commerce. Outside of town were plantations, maintained by enslaved labor, owned by Cherokee leaders—many of whom were educated in northeastern boarding schools.

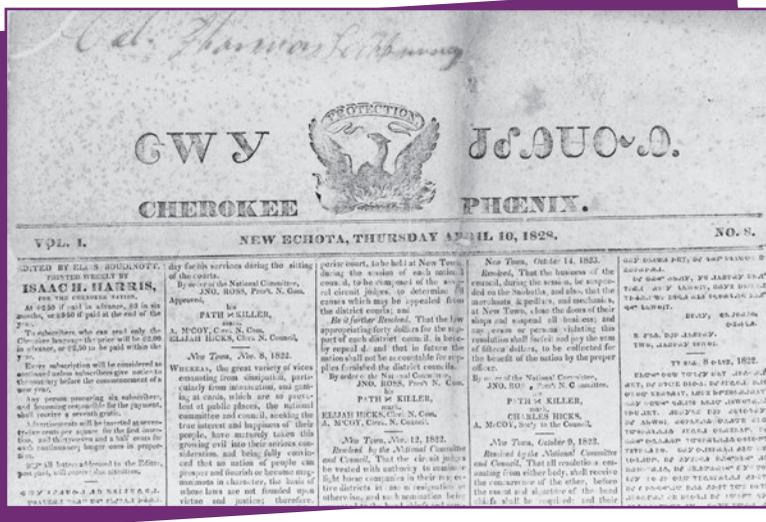
By 1827, a new and improved constitution (similar to the constitution of the United States) was drafted, emphasizing the sovereignty of the Cherokee Nation. The Principal Chief's position was strengthened and the constitution proclaimed: "the boundaries of this Nation, embracing the lands solemnly guarantied [sic] and reserved forever to the Cherokee Nation by the Treaties concluded with the United States." Shortly after its adoption, John Ross was elected Principal Chief in the nation's first elections. Major Ridge served as his counselor for the next seven years.

## ELIAS BOUDINOT AND THE *CHEROKEE PHOENIX*

Elias Boudinot (born with Cherokee names Gallegina and Buck Oowatie) was the nephew of Major Ridge and, like his uncle, a product of the northeastern boarding schools. Boudinot was the first editor of the *Cherokee Phoenix*, the first Native American newspaper in United States history. Published at New Echota, the *Cherokee Phoenix* became the major source for delivering Cherokee news, ideas, grievances, and interests to the American public. It was printed in two columns, one in English, and the other in Cherokee.

Samuel Worcester, a missionary affiliated with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), arrived at the Brainerd mission in Tennessee around the same time the

Cherokee government was planning to put Sequoyah's syllabary to use in print media. Worcester moved to New Echota when the Cherokee established the new capital. Taking the syllabary from written to print form required casting the characters in



DETAIL, TITLE PAGE OF THE *CHEROKEE PHOENIX* FROM APRIL 10, 1828. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS SERIAL AND GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS DIVISION, LC-USZ62-115660.

type. Some historians have argued that Samuel Worcester adapted Sequoyah's syllabary from script to print. Recent scholars use documentary evidence to argue that Sequoyah and members of the Cherokee National Council designed the print types themselves, and only relied on Worcester to help coordinate ordering the types and printing press from Boston.

The *Missionary Herald* published news of the printing press at New Echota and the plans for a newspaper in December 1827:

“It was mentioned in the *Missionary Herald* for July, that a fount of types had been ordered by the Cherokee government... These have now been completed; and, together with a fount of English types, and an iron press, of an improved construction, and the entire furniture for a printing office, were forwarded about the middle of last month. The press will be employed in printing the New Testament and other portions of the Bible, and school-books in the Cherokee language, and such other books in Cherokee or English... A Prospectus has also been issued for a newspaper, entitled the *Cherokee Phoenix*, to be printed partly in Cherokee and partly in English... All this has been done by order of the Cherokee government, and at their expense.

Among the Cherokees, then, we are to see the first printing press ever owned and employed by any nation of the Aborigines of this continent; the first effort at writing and printing in characters of their own; the first newspaper, and the first book printed among themselves; the first editor; and, the first well organized system for securing a general diffusion of knowledge among the people.”

The *Cherokee Phoenix* attracted subscribers all over the country and even abroad. In part, the Cherokee hoped the publication of a newspaper in English and the Cherokee language would convince Americans that the Cherokee were “civilized” enough to live peacefully as its own sovereign nation. The focus on advocating for the Cherokee and against removal became so important that the paper changed its name to *The Cherokee Phoenix and Indians' Advocate* in 1829.

Elias Boudinot lost his job as editor because of his growing support for voluntary Cherokee removal. Anti-removal advocate Elijah Hicks took over until May 1834 when the printing press at New Echota published its last issue. The next year, the Georgia Guard confiscated

the printing press and several Cherokee signed the controversial New Echota Treaty without permission from the Cherokee



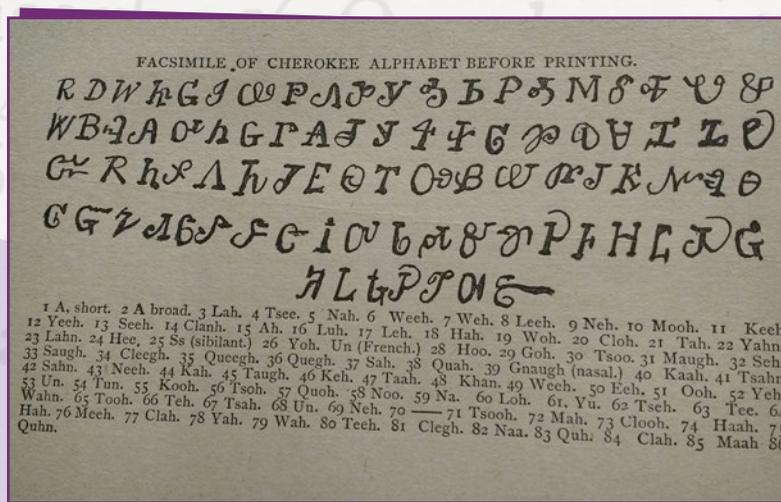
INSIDE THE PRINT SHOP AT NEW ECHOTA STATE HISTORIC SITE

government. One of the signers was Elias Boudinot. Under the treaty, the Cherokee gave up all lands east of the Mississippi River in exchange for lands in what is now Oklahoma. Despite efforts to protest the legality of the treaty, the remaining Cherokee living east of the Mississippi were forced to move West during the infamous Trail of Tears in 1838.

## WRITING WITH THE CHEROKEE SYLLABARY

Using the chart and example below, see if you can write the English words below using the Cherokee syllabary on the next page.

<i>English Word</i>	<i>Cherokee (Phonetic)</i>	<i>Cherokee Syllabary</i>
Cherokee	tsa-la-gi	GWY
Sequoyah	s-si-quo-ya	ᎠᎩᎠᎵᎦᎵ
Blue	sa-go-ni-ge	
Earth	e-lo-hi	
Warm	u-ga-na-wa	
Friend	u-na-li-i	
Hello	o-si-yo	



FACSIMILE OF THE CHEROKEE ALPHABET BEFORE PRINTING IN SE-QUO-YAH, THE AMERICAN CADMUS AND MODERN MOSES...BY GEO. E. FOSTER. FROM THE GEORGIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY RARE COLLECTION.

# Cherokee Syllabary

	1 a	2 e	3 i	4 o	5 u	6 v
1 Vowels	D	R	T	Ꭰ	Ꭱ	Ꭲ
2 g	Ꭳ Ꭴ	Ꭵ	Ꭶ	Ꭷ	Ꭸ	Ꭹ
3 h	Ꭺ	Ꭻ	Ꭼ	Ꭽ	Ꭾ	Ꭿ
4 l	Ꮀ	Ꮁ	Ꮂ	Ꮃ	Ꮄ	Ꮅ
5 m	Ꮆ	Ꮇ	Ꮈ	Ꮉ	Ꮊ	
6 n/hn	Ꮋ Ꮌ	Ꮍ	Ꮎ	Ꮏ	Ꮐ	Ꮑ
7 qu(ku)	Ꮒ	Ꮓ	Ꮔ	Ꮕ	Ꮖ	Ꮗ
8 s	Ꮘ Ꮙ	Ꮚ	Ꮛ	Ꮜ	Ꮝ	Ꮞ
9 d/t	Ꮟ Ꮠ	Ꮡ Ꮢ	Ꮣ Ꮤ	Ꮥ	Ꮦ	Ꮧ
10 dl/tl	Ꮨ Ꮩ	Ꮪ	Ꮫ	Ꮬ	Ꮭ	Ꮮ
11 ts	Ꮯ	Ꮰ	Ꮱ	Ꮲ	Ꮳ	Ꮴ
12 w/(h)w	Ꮵ	Ꮶ	Ꮷ	Ꮸ	Ꮹ	Ꮺ
13 y/(h)y	Ꮻ	Ꮼ	Ꮽ	Ꮾ	Ꮿ	Ᏸ

The content in this publication is aligned to the following Georgia Standards of Excellence:

### Second Grade

- SS2H1 Describe the lives and contributions of historical figures in Georgia history.
- SS2H2 Describe the Georgia Creek and Cherokee cultures of the past in terms of tools, clothing, homes, ways of making a living, and accomplishments
- SS2G2 Describe the cultural and geographic systems associated with the historical figures in SS2H1 and Georgia's Creek and Cherokee in SS2H2.

### Fourth Grade

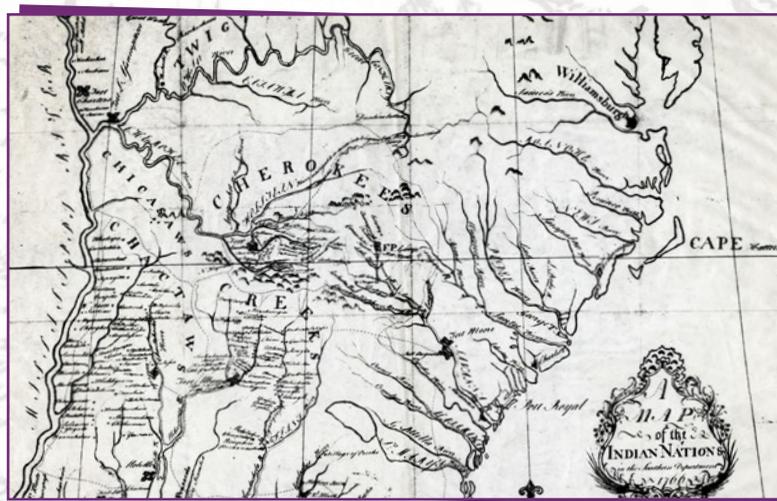
- SS4H3 Explain westward expansion in America.

### Eighth Grade

- SS8H4 Explain significant factors that affected westward expansion in Georgia between 1789 and 1840.

### High School

- SSUSH4 Analyze the ideological, military, social, and diplomatic aspects of the American Revolution.
- SSUSH5 Investigate specific events and key ideas that brought about the adoption and implementation of the United States Constitution.
- SSUSH6 Analyze the challenges faced by the first five presidents and how they responded.



A MAP OF THE INDIAN NATIONS IN THE SOUTHERN DEPARTMENT, 1766. FROM THE GEORGIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY MAP COLLECTION, MS1361-MP.

# SEQUOYAH AND THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

by

*G*EOORGIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## About the Georgia Historical Society

Georgia Historical Society (GHS) is the premier independent statewide institution responsible for collecting, examining, and teaching Georgia history. GHS houses the oldest and most distinguished collection of materials related exclusively to Georgia history in the nation.

Whether through hands-on activities with primary sources in the GHS Research Center, in-school presentations by GHS staff, or curriculum aligned with state and national education standards, the Georgia Historical Society enables students of all ages to experience history beyond the textbook.

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