

ARTICLE

Sequoyah and the Creation of the Cherokee Syllabary

The written form of the Cherokee language, introduced by Sequoyah in 1821, offered its people a bridge between prehistory and modernity.

GRADES

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SUBJECTS

Social Studies, U.S. History, World History



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BACKGROUND INFO

VOCABULARY

In the early years of the 19th century, the remarkable inventiveness of a Cherokee man, named Sequoyah, helped his people preserve their language and cultural traditions, and remain united amid the encroachment of Euro-American society into their territory. Working on his own over a 12-year span, Sequoyah created a syllabary –a set of written symbols to represent each syllable in the spoken Cherokee language. This made it possible for the Cherokee to achieve mass literacy in a short period of time. Cherokee became one of the earliest indigenous American languages to have a functional written analogue.

Sequoyah was born in present-day U.S. state of Tennessee in the years preceding the American Revolution. He was afflicted by physical lameness that caused him to limp, and as a young man, he worked as a trader, an industry he learned from his mother. He later became a silversmith and a blacksmith. By the year 1809, he had spent

considerable time thinking about the written forms of communication used by European Americans and the power of written language. He began considering how the Cherokee might devise a system of writing tailored to the sounds of their own language. Many of his fellow Cherokees disapproved of the idea of fixing words to paper, and some thought the practice was too close to witchcraft. Despite this disapproval, Sequoyah was determined to give the Cherokee language a written form.

Unfortunately, the War of 1812 forced him to put his plans to develop a written Cherokee language on hold. Sequoyah volunteered to fight against the Red Stick Creeks during the war and saw action at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in the present-day U.S. state of Alabama. Afterward, he settled in Willstown (now Fort Payne) and devoted himself to the task of converting the Cherokee language into written form.

Sequoyah was monolingual—he spoke only his mother tongue, Cherokee—and thus did not know how to read or write in any language. Despite this, he had an intuitive grasp of the function and significance written communication could assume among people who had mastered the skill. His first approach was to draw a visual symbol for every word in the language—a logographic or

pictographic approach. Before long, he realized this task would be overwhelming. Instead, he began listening more carefully to Cherokee speech, studying the sound patterns that formed words. He heard vowels and consonants and discerned many variations, finally isolating about 85 distinct syllables. He completed the syllabary by assigning each sound a symbol, using a printed Christian Bible for examples of how letters could be shaped.

Sequoyah's daughter, A-Yo-Ka, helped her father complete the work and was learning the syllabary herself at age six. Sequoyah next taught his brother-in-law to read the syllabary. After word of his syllabary spread, Sequoyah and his daughter were charged with witchcraft and brought to trial before their town chief. He and A-Yo-Ka were forcibly separated, then asked to exchange messages using the script, to see if it worked the way that Sequoyah said it did. Though their written communication was successful, some were still convinced that they were using magic to communicate. However, in the end, the warriors presiding over the trial determined that Sequoyah had indeed found a way to represent talking on paper, and asked him to teach them how to read.

Because it was tailored to the sounds unique to the Cherokee language, Sequoyah's syllabary was not

difficult for native Cherokee speakers to learn. Over the next couple of years, a large proportion of the Cherokee population attained literacy. Sometime during this period, Sequoyah traveled westward across the Mississippi River and taught the syllabary to Cherokees in the present-day U.S. state of Arkansas. A few years later, after the United States Congress passed the Indian Removal Act in 1830, most of the Cherokee would be forced to migrate even farther along the Arkansas River, on the Trail of Tears. Forced from their homes and robbed of most of their belongings, they took the Cherokee language and syllabary with them. Along the way, many died.

Sequoyah's syllabary, which the Cherokee Nation formally adopted in 1825, proved its value during an extremely trying period in the nation's history. Through the work of white, Christian missionary Samuel Worcester, the Cherokee obtained a printing press and launched the *Cherokee Phoenix* in 1828. This was the first bilingual newspaper in U.S. history, printed in English and a slightly modified version of the Cherokee syllabary. The newspaper and other written messages helped maintain Cherokee unity and solidarity at a time when the Cherokee nation was dispersed geographically by the Indian Removal Act and divided politically by tensions between traditionalist and assimilationist factions.

In the 21st century, Sequoyah's Cherokee syllabary remains in use, and is visible on street signs and buildings across the Cherokee Nation (located in northeast of the U.S. state of Oklahoma), where Cherokee is the co-official language alongside English. In addition, the syllabary is taught to students of all ages in schools and universities in Oklahoma and North Carolina. It also remains a focus of academic research. In 2019, a collaborative team of Native American scholars published a paper analyzing several inscriptions recently found in a cave near Willstown, the Alabama town where Sequoyah was living when he developed the syllabary. Some of these inscriptions appear to be documenting group ceremonies conducted deep inside the Manitou Cave. The date of one event, April of 1828, is actually written on the cave wall. Another message is carved in syllabary letters on the cave's high ceiling. Some of these letters are written backward—facing into the rock, so to speak—and spell out the words, "I am your grandson." The researchers believe the writer or writers of this message may have been intending to communicate with ancestral spirits, the "Old Ones," in the recesses of the cave.

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