Chapter 12 Lesson 2

Removing Native Americans

As we expanded westward, the Native American tribes of the Cherokee, Creek, Seminole, Chickasaw, and Choctaw occupied parts of Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Florida. They had created successful farming communities and were considered “civilized” thus they were referred to as the “Five Civilized Tribes.”

Though we recognized their successful communities we did not necessarily respect their rights. Some white people wanted the Native American land for themselves. They wanted the federal government to force eastern Native Americans to relocate to lands west of the Mississippi River.

Andrew Jackson supported this viewpoint. When he became president in 1829, he stated that he wanted to move all Native Americans to the Great Plains. Many thought this region was a wasteland where American settlers would never live. Many people thought if we moved them there the conflict with them would stop.

The Cherokee Versus Georgia

In 1830 Jackson pushed through the Indian Removal Act. It allowed the federal government to pay Native Americans to move west. Jackson sent officials to make treaties with the Native Americans in the Southeast. In 1834 Congress established the Indian Territory. Most of the region was in what is now Oklahoma, this would be the new home for the Native Americans of the Southeast.

Most eastern Native Americans felt forced to sell their land and move west. The Cherokee refused to do so. In the treaties of 1790’s, the federal government had recognized the Cherokee as a separate nation. However the state of Georgia, where they lived, refused to accept that status. In 1830 Georgia made Cherokee land part of the state. It also began to enforce state laws in the Cherokee nation.

As pressure mounted for relocation, the Cherokee appealed to the American people:

“We are aware, that some persons suppose it will be for our advantage to remove beyond the Mississippi….Our people universally think otherwise….We wish to remain on the land of our fathers.”

Still Georgia pressured the Cherokee. In response the Cherokee turned to the Supreme Court. In Worcester v. Georgia (1832) Chief Justice John Marshall ruled that Georgia had no right to interfere with the Cherokee. President Andrew Jackson, who supported Georgia’s removal of the Cherokee, declared that he would ignore the Supreme Court ruling. “John Marshall has made his decision,” Jackson is said to have declared, “now let him enforce it.” No one was willing or able to challenge the president’s failure to enforce the Court’s ruling.

The Trail of Tears.

By 1835, the Cherokee were divided about what to do. That year the federal government convinced a small number of Cherokee – about 500 of them – to sign the Treaty of New Echota. In this treaty, the group agreed to give up all Cherokee land by 1838.

Cherokee Chief John Ross sent a protest to the US Senate. Ross explained that the few Cherokee who signed it did not speak for all the 17,000 Cherokee in the region. Many white Americans, including senators Daniel Webster and Henry Clay, also opposed the treaty as unfair. Their pleas did not change the mind of President Jackson or the white settlers. In 1836 the Senate approved the treaty by a single vote.

When the treaty’s deadline of 1838 arrived only about 2,000 Cherokee had moved west. Jackson’s successor President Martin Van Buren, ordered the army to move the rest of them. In May 1838, General Winfield Scott arrived with 7,000 troops to remove the remaining Cherokee by force. He told them resistance and escape were hopeless. The Cherokee knew that fighting would lead to their destruction. Filled with sadness and anger, Cherokee leaders gave in.

Between June and December 1838, soldiers rounded up Cherokee in North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee. Under guard they began their march to Indian Territory in the West.

The forced relocation of some 15,000 Cherokee was a terrible ordeal, many were not prepared for the journey. Trouble started before they even set out. As the Cherokee crowded in camps and awaited the command to march, illness broke out. As many as 2,000 Cherokee died.

Once on the trail, the Cherokee suffered from hunger and from exposure to the weather. These conditions led to another 2,000 deaths.

When the relocation was over about one quarter of the Cherokee population was dead. The Cherokee came to call their forced journey west the Trail Where They Cried, historians call it the Trail of Tears.

Resistance and Removal

Many of the Native American peoples did not want to give up their lands. The Seminole in Florida were the only group to successfully resist removal. They faced intense pressure in the early 1830’s to sign treaties giving up their land, but the Seminole leader Osceola and his followers refused to leave. They decided to fight instead. Osceola was born a Creek but lived among the Seminole instead.

“I will make the white man red with blood, and then blacken him in the sun and rain,” Osceola vowed.

The Seminole Wars

In 1835 the US Army arrived in Florida to force the removal of the Seminole. Instead, December 1835, a group of Seminole attacked troops led by Major Francis Dade as they marched across central Florida. Only a few soldiers survived. The Dade Massacre prompted a call for additional troops to fight the Seminole.

Between 1835 and 1842, about 3,000 Seminole and African Americans known as Black Seminoles fought some 30,000 US soldiers. The Black Seminole were escaped slaves from mostly Georgia and South Carolina. Some lived among the Seminole people. Others had built their own settlements. Like the Seminole, they did not want to move. They feared that the soldiers would return them back to slavery. Together the Seminole and the Black Seminoles attacked white settlements along the Florida coast. They made surprise attacks and then retreated back into the forests and swamps.

The war cost the US over $20 million and the lives of more than 1,500 troops. Many Seminole also died, others were captured and forced to move west. In 1842, with most of the surviving Seminole now in Indian Territory, the fighting stopped.

War broke out again in 1855 over what little land in Florida the Seminole had left. By 1858, the few remaining Seminole had escaped into the Everglades, where their descendants still live today.

Life in the West

By 1842, only a few scattered groups of Native Americans remained east of the Mississippi River. Most of them now lived in the West. They had given up more than 100 million acres of land. In return they received about 68 million dollars and 32 million acres west of the Mississippi. There they lived, organized by tribes, on reservations. Eventually white settlements would extend into these areas as well.

The Five Civilized Tribes relocated in the eastern half of Indian Territory on lands already claimed by several plains people, including the Osage, Comanche, and Kiowa. The US Army built forts in the area and promised to protect the Five Civilized Tribes and maintain peace in the area. The Choctaw police force, known as the Lighthorsemen, also helped maintain public order and public safety.

Settled in their new homes, the Five Civilized Tribes developed their own constitutions and governments. They built farms and schools. However, the disputes over removal that arose within each tribal group during the 1830’s continued to divide the groups for years to come.