

Our Heritage

Information for this article was obtained from the Cherokee County Heritage Book, Volumes I and II, published by the Cherokee County Museum, and from the Cherokee County Directory, published by the Cherokee County Chamber of Commerce

The heritage of Cherokee County is linked arm-in-arm with the large population of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee, which at one time called the area home. Located in the westernmost tip of North Carolina, Cherokee County was named for the Cherokee nation, which in 1715 had a domain of 40,000 square miles with an estimated population of 11,210-4,000 warriors and 53 towns. The tribe's principal towns were situated on the waters of the Hiwassee and Tuckasegee Rivers.

In 1821, the Rev. Evan Jones established a Baptist Mission just about where the Peachtree Creek is located, near the old Natchez Village. A trading post was established in 1828 by ARS Hunter, which was erected on the southwest side of Hiwassee and across from the mouth of the Valley River. The trading post became known as Huntington.

As the white man began to explore the surrounding area, they began to understand the importance of the vast wealth of natural resources it contained. Explorers in the early 1700s described the area as "hilly land where the soil was deep and rich, and rivers promise an easy route to the heart of the continent-or even beyond."

Title to Indian lands east of the Mississippi was eventually extinguished by treaties by the year 1835. The white man coveted the Indians' rich, fertile land and fast, rolling rivers. With the demise of the titles to the land, the Cherokee Nation agreed to be moved west to Oklahoma. But while the covetness of the natural resources in Cherokee County was a prime reason for the white man wanting the Indian land, what really sealed the tribe's loss of the land was discovery of gold.

Pioneers, even back in Hernando DeSoto's days (1540), are said to have found their way into Cherokee County and the town of Guasilli, which was inhabited by the Cherokee Indians. On their voyage through this area, DeSoto's expedition mined for gold along the great Tennessee, Hiwassee and Valley rivers. Evidence of gold mining has since been discovered in the forms of old tunnels, shafts, Spanish cannon ball, pistols bearing the Spanish Coat of Arms, and coin molds. In 1560, another Spanish expedition-this one led by Juan Pardo, came into the mountains along the same Path DeSoto had taken. Records indicate the group mined the area for gold as well.

Between 1836 and 1838, President Andrew Jackson sent General Winfield Scott and his soldiers, along with 7,000 troops, to the area to set up headquarters for the removal of the Cherokee. Six forts were constructed in the far western end of North Carolina to house the Indians prior to the mass exodus to Oklahoma. The largest was Fort Butler, located on the Hiwassee River, near the Huntington settlement. The area around that site is now known as Murphy.

From the various forts, troops herded the Indians from their homeland in North Carolina, Tennessee and Alabama along the "Trail of Tears."