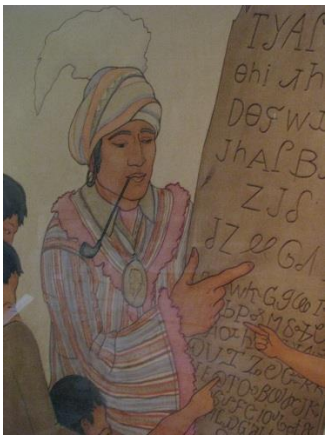
Sequoyah



Sequoyah was a soldier, silversmith, blacksmith, teacher, and owned and worked in salt production. However, to most people Sequoyah is the man who gave the Cherokees a written language that has proved instrumental in aiding its revival today.

Ode to Sequoyah

The People's language cannot perish-nay
When from the face of this great continent
Inevitable doom hath swept away
The last memorial- the last fragment
Of tribes- some scholar learned shall pore
Upon thy letters, seeking ancient lore.

Some bard shall lift a voice in praise of thee
In moving numbers tell the world how men
Scoffed thee, hissed thee, charged thee with lunacy!
And who could not give 'nough honor when
At length in spite of jeers, of want and need,
They genius shaped a dream into a deed.

Alex Posey- Creek Indian Poet

(From a plaque at Sequoyah's Cabin)

Early Life

Sequoyah was born George Guess near Knoxville, Tennessee around 1770. Although there are many different stories told about Sequoyah's early life that may or may not be true, it is known that he was raised by his Cherokee mother after his father left them when he was young, and he had a leg disability through birth or injury.

Sequoyah and the Syllabary

Sequoyah became intrigued by the idea of communicating through the written word through his observations of the white men around him. He called this correspondence "the talking leaves" and set out trying to create a written Cherokee language system so that they could communicate through long distances and with more privacy.

Originally, he tried to create symbols that could represent whole words; however, this proved to be too difficult, and so he gave up that concept, and decided to look elsewhere/ he eventually turned to the syllables in the Cherokee language, and he realized that the language was made up of repeated sounds. Sequoyah listened intently and developed the syllabary to represent the sounds words were composed of, and a written language was born. This process occurred around 1809-1821.

Sequoyah travelled to Arkansas territory to show settle Cherokee's his syllabary, but most were skeptical, and saw no need for it. In an attempt to convince them, he asked them to say a word, he wrote it down, and then he asked his daughter to read what the paper said. When she read the word allowed, the people were convinced that the system worked, and in 1825 the Cherokee nation officially accepted the syllabary as part of their language and culture.

Beyond the Syllabary

In 1828 Sequoyah joined a delegation sent to Washington by the Arkansas Cherokee to make a treaty to exchange their lands for lands in Indian Territory (Oklahoma). Following this trip, Sequoyah traded his land and the salt works he operated for land located on Big Skin Bayou Creek in Indian Territory (Sequoyah County, Oklahoma).

While there, he built himself a cabin, which is located in the now Sallisaw, NE Oklahoma.

Sequoyah died in sometime between 1843-1845 while on a journey to seek Cherokee in Mexico. It is unknown how he died, but a repot given to the Cherokee Advocate by a travelling companion simply said he died while dinner was being made for him in Mexico. It is believed he is buried in San Fernando.

In 1905, the citizens of Indian Territory wished to establish a state spate from the rest of what is now Oklahoma. The nations feared that their territory would be taken by the residents of the lands next to theirs. A convention met and it was voted that there should be the State of Sequoyah. However, the bill was tabled, and statehood was declared to be by partisan decision, and so the two territories combined to create the State of Oklahoma.

Legacy

Sequoyah's widow sold his cabin to another Cherokee family, and it survived the Civil War and the years that followed. The Oklahoma Historical society preserved the cabin, and built a stone building around it for preservation for the years to come. In 1966, the cabin and its surrounding area became a designated National Historical landmark; an important part of America's history that is available for the generations to come.