Trail of Tears National Historic Trail
National Park Service

Trail of Tears
Kentucky and Illinois Map and Guide

It is disturbing to reflect on the situation... there is now a vast amount of sickness, and many deaths...all are houseless & homeless in a strange land, and in a cold region, exposed to weather almost unknown in their native country. But they are prisoners. True their own chiefs have directly hold of their hands, yet the U. States officers hold the chiefs with an iron grasp...

Journal of Daniel Butrick, crossing Illinois, December 1838

Until Now

"The Indians as a whole carry in their countenances every thing but the appearance of happiness. Some carry a downcast dejected look bordering on the appearance of despair..."

New York Observer, January 26, 1839

By the time the Cherokee made it to Kentucky on the Northern, Benge, or Water routes, many had been on the Trail of Tears for months. Removed from their homes in the spring of 1838, the Cherokee suffered in overcrowded, hot, and disease-ridden internment camps throughout the summer.

At Fort Cass, the primary staging camp, the Cherokee were divided into groups of approximately 1,000 people. From there, these detachments traveled by land or water to Indian Territory, today's Oklahoma.

The first three detachments departed in June on the Water Route. In August, the first land route detachment departed, with seven more groups following in September. Most land route detachments followed the Northern Route that passed through Kentucky and Illinois.

Once winter began, the Cherokee experienced horrible conditions. Having endured the removal camps, the Cherokee were already exhausted when they entered Kentucky even though they had only traveled 200 of the 800 miles to Indian Territory.

Rivers

"Received Paducah Kentucky 17th July 1838 of Capt. G.S. Drane U.S.A. and disbursing agent for the Removal and subsistence of Cherokee Indians one hundred and eight dollars and thirty and a half cents in full of the above account."

Receipt from merchant McPherson Martin

Initially, transporting the Cherokee by boat to Indian Territory was the preferred method for removal. The first Cherokee detachment that left Ross' Landing made the trip in 13 days. However, the water route detachments that followed were mired in problems. It took one group 103 days to make the journey.

Moving large groups of people requires a lot of advance planning. Local merchants agreed to resupply detachments at fixed landing points. Often detachment leaders found that the supplies were unavailable or spoiled.

Even though the advent of steam technology had made traveling on the rivers quicker and more comfortable, the Cherokee were primarily transported on flatboats. These boats were often lashed side by side to a steamboat or towed behind, especially through some of the more dangerous rapids on the Tennessee River.

Despite improved technology, low water levels hindered progress along the route. In addition, passengers and crew feared dangers such as the quick spread of sickness onboard, exposure to disease along the river lowlands, fires aboard the steamers, boiler explosions, and unpredictable weather. Some detachments left the river and finished by land.

Roads

"...we have Suffered a great deal...The roads are in very bad Order as the ground was frozen very deep...We have been lying by about two weeks... The [river] has been full of large quantities of floating Ice...we must calculate on suffering a good deal from hardships & exposure before we yet reach our homes in the far West."

Recollection of a survivor of the Trail of Tears

Most Cherokee traveled overland on foot during their forced removal to Indian Territory, with some traveling on horses and in wagons. The detachments followed a network of established roads that linked major towns and settlements though these often varied in width or condition. Each detachment had wagons, mostly for supplies or to carry those who could not walk, so wider and more established roads were preferred. At the time, very few bridges existed so makeshift roads were built to traverse smaller streams and wet areas, while ferries were used to cross larger rivers.

In more than one instance, the detachments faced weather that slowed or halted their journey west. The rain and cold turned roads into muddy paths. When large ice blocks floated down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, ferries were unable to cross, forcing the Cherokee to wait, stretched out in frozen camps for miles. As the detachments continued north and west, road conditions were so poor that detachments had to repair or build new sections of road. These corduroy roads, made by laying logs perpendicular to the direction of travel, allowed the detachments to continue through low or swampy areas.

Camps

"We found them in the forest camped for the night by the road side under a severe fall of rain accompanied by heavy wind. With their canvas for a shield from the inclemency of the weather, and the cold wet ground for a resting place...

We met several detachments in the southern part of Kentucky, two thousand Indians with horses and mules in proportion. The forward part of the train we found just pitching their tents for the night, and notwithstanding some thirty or forty wagons were already stationed, we found the road literally filled with the procession for about three miles in length."

New York Observer, January 26, 1839

Those Cherokee forcibly removed from their homes brought little with them. Unprepared for camping in frozen conditions, the days of exposure compounded the suffering, especially for the young and aged. At the same time, extreme conditions limited forward progress due to exhaustion and rampant disease, requiring the entire group to stay in one location for days or weeks.

While the general parameters for camp could usually be met – a large open area and fresh water for both people and livestock – finding the right place to set up tents, gather firewood, and prepare meals was a daily decision. At times a detachment would begin to set up camp, only to be told that they were on private land and had to leave. Other times, torrential rain or wind or ice made a comfortable camp impossible.

The Road Ahead

"From Fort Payne to Tennessee via the country was mountainous and the road bad, the detachment was three days in crossing the river from there to the Iron Banks [Columbus, Kentucky] the road passed over a rough country and was in bad condition, in some instances we were compelled to repair bridges before the people and wagons could cross.

We were detained ten days in crossing the Mississippi and from this point to Jackson [Missouri] about 70 miles is most of way swamp."

Col. J. L.Colburn, Benge detachment, March 2, 1841

After crossing into Missouri, the detachments had 420 more miles to Indian Territory along poor roads and bridges, sometimes having to repair or build them along the way.

Some detachments had already lost hundreds of members along the route due to weather, exhaustion, and illness. Other Cherokee detained along the way due to sickness would rest for a few days and join another detachment when they came through.

All journeying the Trail of Tears hoped to reunite with friends and family in Oklahoma. Many never had that opportunity. More than 16,000 Cherokee traveled the Northern, Benge, and Water routes through Kentucky and Illinois, but only 13,570 arrived in Indian Territory.

ROUTES THROUGH KENTUCKY AND ILLINOIS

BENGE

The Benge detachment left Fort Payne, Alabama, on September 28, 1838. They crossed the Mississippi River from Columbus (Iron Banks), Kentucky, to Belmont, Missouri. It took 1,200 people on this journey 111 days to reach Indian Territory.

WATER

Two detachments had already left for Indian Territory by the time forced military removal began in May 1838. The next month, three detachments totaling nearly 3,000 Cherokee left Ross' Landing. The last water detachment, which included Chief John Ross, departed in December 1838. All followed the Tennessee, Ohio, Mississippi, and Arkansas Rivers. Trip length varied from 13 to 103 days.

NORTHERN

Eight Northern Route detachments left the Fort Cass, Tennessee, area in August and September 1838. The journey included more than 8,000 people and took between 125 and 183 days.

NORTHERN ROUTE VARIATIONS

Three detachments totaling over 3,600 Cherokee took variations of the Northern Route in September and October, leaving from Fort Cass and Vann's Town, taking between 152 and 189 days.

Photograph: View of the Mississippi River, near the location of the ferry landing where Cherokee detachments crossed from Illinois into Missouri.

WATER ROUTE



Cherokee on the water route of the Trail of Tears traveled by flatboats towed by steamboats. The close quarters and river conditions wore down those onboard.

LAND ROUTES



Cherokee on the land route traveled through a bitter winter that led to delays at icy river crossings and poor road conditions. In some cases, a road was built to provide a path for Indian Removal.



Two land routes and one water route carried Cherokee from Tennessee, through Kentucky and Illinois, and then west into Missouri. The Cherokee had already endured leaving their homeland and now suffered on the trail west.

NORTHERN ROUTE

COLORS ALIGN WITH TRAIL OF TEARS ROUTES ON MAP



ILLINOIS

HAMBURG HILL
Water Plant Road, Jonesboro
(Union County)

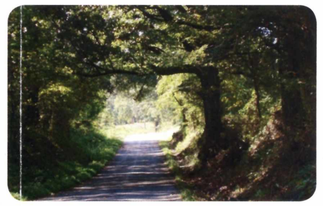
This approximately 1 mile segment of the original trail route is located on the Shawnee National Forest and is accessible by foot. The route leads from the hills west of Jonesboro down onto the Mississippi River floodplain where many detachments had to wait in frozen conditions. Amenities include a parking lot, picnic area, restroom, trail, and interpretation.



ILLINOIS

CAMP GROUND CHURCH AND CEMETERY
50 Tunnel Lane, Anna
(Union County)

Numerous natural, freshwater springs made this site an ideal place for the Cherokee to camp. Oral history indicates that Cherokee burials occurred here alongside a small family cemetery. There are two exhibits with more information.



ILLINOIS

GOLCONDA TO VIENNA HISTORIC ROUTE
Homberg Road/Trail of Tears Road
(Pope County)

When the Cherokee disembarked from the ferry at Golconda, they continued west towards Missouri. This approximately eight-mile segment of drivable road follows the original road corridor traveled by the Cherokee in 1838 and 1839.



ILLINOIS & KENTUCKY

BERRY'S FERRY
End of Hwy 133/Lola Rd at the Ohio River (Livingston Co., KY); Golconda Riverfront (Pope County, IL)

Thousands of Cherokee boarded ferries here to cross the Ohio River during the 1838-39 migrations. In late December 1838, moving ice caused the ferry to shut down. As a result, thousands of Cherokee were forced to wait – some for weeks – in scattered encampments along the route in Kentucky.



KENTUCKY

MANTLE ROCK PRESERVE
1800 Lola Road (Hwy 133), Smithland
(Livingston County)

Severe icy conditions during a harsh winter on the Ohio River in December 1838, caused the Peter Hildebrand detachment of 1,766 Cherokee to camp at the Mantle Rock area for about 20 days, until they could cross the river in January 1839. The camp stretched more than three miles in length. Owned by the Nature Conservancy, this site is open to the public.



KENTUCKY

TRAIL OF TEARS COMMEMORATIVE PARK
100 Trail of Tears Drive, Hopkinsville
(Christian County)

The gravesites of Whitepath and Fly Smith are marked at the park. The emigrating Cherokee camped on land north of the cemetery on the property. A log cabin is utilized as the museum and interpretive center which is open to the public, with posted hours.



KENTUCKY

BIG SPRING (TRAIL OF TEARS PARK)
East Washington Street, Princeton
(Caldwell County)

In November 1837, an early removal detachment of 365 Cherokee led by Lt. B.B. Cannon stopped at Big Spring. Over the next two years, thousands more followed. The Reverend Daniel Butrick recorded that Richard Taylor's group passed through "a very beautiful village called Princeton" on December 7, 1838. The park and site of Big Spring is open to the public all year.

DRIVE THE TRAIL

KENTUCKY
- Routes 91, 70, & 133 follow the Northern Route
- Routes 1529, 58, 94, 1826, & 123 follow the Benge Route
- State Road – North Segment, near Hill Cemetery, follows State Road (CA-254) running northwest from the cemetery. Begins 2.5 miles southeast of Fredonia on Hill Cemetery Road.

ILLINOIS
- The signed routes of Golconda to Vienna Road and Vienna to Jonesboro Road follow the Northern Route of the Trail of Tears as it winds back and forth across Hwy 146.

WALK ALONG THE TRAIL

KENTUCKY
- Land Between the Lakes National Recreation Area
- Mantle Rock Preserve
- Paducah Waterfront*

ILLINOIS
- Hamburg Hill, Shawnee National Forest
- Fort Massac State Park*
- Fort Defiance State Park*

*The Ohio River is the Trail of Tears. You can walk along the river.

LEARN MORE ONLINE

National Park Service: **nps.gov/trte**

Trail of Tears Association: **nationaltota.org**



FOLLOW THE SIGNS

Historic sites and segments are marked with the official trail logo on signs along roads and paths.

Trail of Tears

CREEK REMOVAL

Additional tribes were forced west during Indian Removal. Two Creek detachments also followed the Water Route.

The Trail of Tears National Historic Trail includes five land and water routes across seven states and 5,000 miles.

Find trail sites in the NPS app and website: go.nps.gov/Places-KY-IL

Download the National Park Service app from Google Play or the App Store.

TRAIL SEGMENTS

HILL CEMETERY (KENTUCKY)
Hill Cemetery Road, Fredonia
(Caldwell County)

The historic road can be seen behind the cemetery, and it continues along Hill Cemetery Road for 2.5 miles.

MCGINNIS CEMETERY (ILLINOIS)
Hwy 146, 2.5 miles east of I-57
(Union County)

Stand at the northern edge of the cemetery to overlook the road depression which runs east/west along the border. The road itself is on private land.

ACCESSING TRAIL PLACES

The National Park Service administers the trail in close partnership with the Trail of Tears Association, the Cherokee Nation, the Eastern Band of Cherokee, federal, state, county, and local agencies, interested groups, and private landowners. Trail sites are in private, municipal, tribal, federal, or state ownership.

It's not possible to follow the entire trail along the historic route. In most cases travelers will have to follow public roads that are close to the authentic trail.

Check with public sites for visiting hours. Please ask for permission before visiting any trail sites on private lands.

WATER & BENGE ROUTES

KENTUCKY

COLUMBUS-BELMONT STATE PARK
350 Park Road, Columbus
(Hickman County)

The John Benge detachment of more than 1,000 Cherokee arrived in Columbus, Kentucky, in November 1838 and camped for ten days near the ferry landing while waiting to cross the Mississippi River to Belmont, Missouri. This area is now Columbus-Belmont State Park, which is open to the public year-round.



ILLINOIS

FORT DEFIANCE STATE PARK
US 60 & US 62, Cairo
(Alexander County)

The first three detachments passed by here on steamboats towing flatboats or keelboats in the summer of 1838 as they descended the Ohio River. The final detachment came on the Water Route in 1839 and included Principal Chief John Ross and 200 Cherokee previously imprisoned by Georgia authorities as well as Cherokee too sick to make the land journey.



ILLINOIS

FORT MASSAC STATE PARK
1308 E 5th Street, Metropolis
(Massac County)

The 1794 fort lay in ruins at the time the four detachments of Cherokee passed this way on steamboats and flatboats heading to Indian Territory on the Ohio River. Illinois' first state park offers a visitor center, restrooms, picnic tables, camping, hiking, fishing, boating, and seasonal hunting. An exhibit about the trail is located on the riverfront.



KENTUCKY

PADUCAH WATERFRONT
End of Broadway, Paducah
(McCracken County)

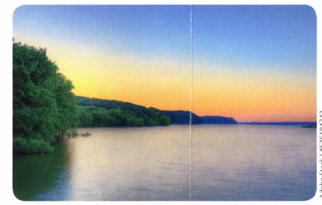
Paducah, located on the Ohio and Tennessee rivers, witnessed the passage of four Water Route detachments and is one of few examples where detachments stopped and resupplied. Both the Cherokee and the Creek stopped at Owens Island, at Paducah, during their removals. The waterfront park at the Paducah floodwall is open to the public.



KENTUCKY & TENNESSEE

LAND BETWEEN THE LAKES NATIONAL RECREATION AREA
Golden Pond
(Lyon & Trigg Counties, KY; Stewart County, TN)

Access over hundreds of miles of undeveloped shoreline, paved roads, trails, and 170,000 acres of forests and open lands. Situated on the Tennessee River, the western side of the recreation area offers multiple places to view the Trail of Tears.



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PATHS WEST

DETACHMENTS

The US government forced the Cherokee Nation to remove to Indian Territory (Oklahoma) via different routes between 1838 and 1839. By May 1838, soldiers forcibly rounded up Cherokee from their homes and placed them into hastily created removal camps, where they waited for months in the heat of summer to begin their 800-mile journey west.

Cherokee removal groups were known as detachments, a military term for troop deployment groups. Indian removal was a military-style evacuation with 1,000-person Cherokee detachments departing on multiple routes west. Those arriving in present-day Oklahoma faced the task of rebuilding a nation on the meager scraps promised by the US government as part of removal treaties. The Trail of Tears National Historic Trail commemorates the removal of the Cherokee and the paths that 17 Cherokee detachments followed westward.

FACING THE NUMBERS

Travel time for the four water detachments varied from 13 to 103 days. For the land routes, travel time was between 125 to 188 days to reach Indian Territory. Many perished as harsh weather conditions, poor food supplies, and the spread of sickness affected all traveling parties.

When 11,718 Cherokee departed the homeland on the Northern Route, they did not know that only 10,153 would arrive in Indian Territory. These numbers, as recorded by Chief John Ross, indicate a loss of 13%. For Cherokee who traveled the Water Route, military accounts show that 3,091 left, but only 2,285 arrived – a loss of 26%. Cherokee on the Benge Route lost 5% of their party.

The Trail of Tears ultimately caused the deaths of more than 4,000 Cherokee.

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