

Early Life

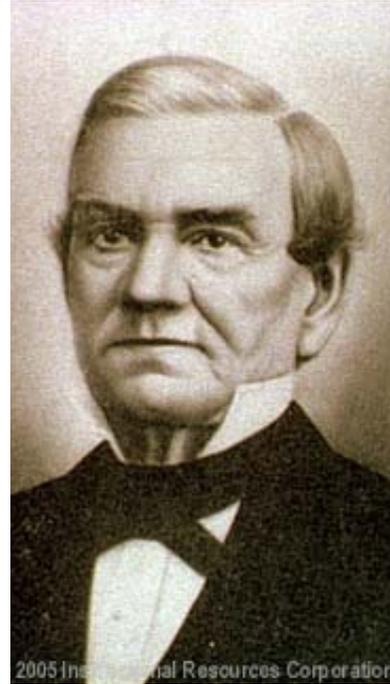
John Ross was chief of the Cherokee during the Indian Removal program known as the Trail of Tears. He was born on October 4, 1790, in Turkeystown, which is in modern day Alabama. His father, Daniel Ross, a white man and trader, was of Scottish descent. His mother, Mary Ross, was part white and part Cherokee Indian. John was only one-eighth Indian, but he grew up as a full-fledged member of the Cherokee Nation. His Cherokee name when he was young was Tsan Usdi, which means "Little John." He and his family lived among the Cherokee and operated trading posts in the territory of the tribe. His family had lived like that since the early 1700s, even before the American Revolution.

John Ross grew up near Lookout Mountain, which is near the border of Georgia and Tennessee. He was educated at home by a tutor and then went to a private academy in Tennessee. He grew up in both the white world and the Cherokee world and knew how to function in both cultures. This background served him well as leader of the Cherokee Nation.

When the United States went to war against Great Britain in the War of 1812, Ross joined the army. He fought with the United States in battles between U.S. forces and the British. In some of those battles, the British were aided by Native American tribes, including the Creek Indians. In the Battle of Horseshoe Bend, Ross fought alongside other famous Americans, including future president Andrew Jackson, against the Creek. After the war, he developed a trading business at Ross Landing, Tennessee.

The Cherokee Nation

The early 1800s marked a time of great change for many Native American tribes in the United States. When Ross was growing up, the Cherokee was one of the major Native American tribes in the southeastern United States. Cherokee territory included parts of Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia, and North Carolina. They had lived in the region for thousands of years and had developed a longstanding culture and way of life. They had been in regular contact and generally gotten along well with white settlers since the early colonial days of the 1700s. But the peace and prosperity of the Cherokee and the other southern Indian tribes changed dramatically in the 1800s.



Cherokee leader John Ross.

In 1803, the United States signed the Louisiana Purchase with France. This extended the borders of the United States beyond the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean. During the next several decades, white settlers began to move into the southeast into the area where the Cherokee lived. Beginning with the administration of James Madison, the U.S. government applied a new policy for white settlement in the South. Over time, government leaders decided to move all Native Americans, including the Cherokee, west of the Mississippi River to the new territory.

The Cherokee wanted to stay in their ancestral lands. They decided to become their own nation with their own constitution and government. They started their own schools, businesses, and newspapers. The government of Georgia protested. It claimed that the Cherokee had no right to do such a thing. It condemned the Indians, calling them “semi-barbarous” and their actions “evil.” Prejudice against Indians was quite common at that time. Indian tribal people were often referred to as “savages.” White people claimed Native Americans were not capable of living in a civilized manner, or even living with whites.

It was around this time that John Ross became a leader of the Cherokee. In 1828, as one of the most respected members of the tribe, he was elected the first principal chief of the Cherokee Nation. He would serve in that role until his death.

The Beginning of the Indian Removal

One of the strongest advocates for Indian Removal was Andrew Jackson. He firmly believed that the Native Americans should be forced from their territory and that the land should be owned by white Americans. After his election to the presidency in 1828, he made Indian Removal a priority. In 1830, Jackson pushed the Indian Removal Act through the U.S. Congress. This gave the U.S. government the power to grant lands west of the Mississippi in exchange for Indian lands within existing state borders.

Ross organized a spirited defense of his people and their right to their lands. He met with federal officials and representatives, wrote letters in support of his position, and began legal action against the removal policies. In two cases that went all the way to the Supreme Court, Ross challenged a Georgia law that allowed the state to take Cherokee land and divide it among white people. The first case, called *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*, was settled in 1831. The Court ruled that it did not have the power to decide in the Georgia case. But in the second case, *Worcester v. Georgia*, in 1832, the Court ruled in favor of the Cherokee Nation. The justices determined that the state of Georgia had no right to take the land of the Cherokee. The ruling also stated that the federal government had the right to regulate Native American land.

Georgia's state government ignored the ruling and the federal government made removal policies a priority. Soon, Ross and his family were forced off their own land.

There was division among the Cherokee people, too. One group of Cherokee signed a treaty with Jackson, even though they had no authority to do so. They agreed to leave Cherokee land and relocate to Oklahoma in exchange for money. Ross felt this was wrong, and it inspired him to take action. He went to the U.S. Congress with 16,000 signatures from the Cherokee people. He urged the senators not to sign the treaty. Ross argued that the treaty had been negotiated with just a small group of Cherokee and did not represent the overall wishes of the Cherokee people. But Jackson got his way again. The treaty passed by a single vote on May 23, 1836.

During the fall and winter of 1838 and 1839, the Cherokee were forcibly removed from their ancestral lands. They were driven westward by U.S. troops, under the command of General Winfield Scott. About 15,000 Cherokee were forced to march 1,000 miles in freezing temperatures and without adequate food, water, or shelter. Approximately 4,000 Cherokee died on the march from starvation, disease, and exposure. Among the dead was Ross's wife, Quatie. The march became known as the Trail of Tears. It is considered a shameful event in American history.

Making a New Life in Oklahoma

When they reached Oklahoma, Ross rallied his people. They formed the United Cherokee Nation and wrote a new constitution. Ross, who had served as chief of the Cherokee since 1828, was once again reelected to lead his people.

In 1840, he wrote directly to President Martin Van Buren about the great losses of his people due to removal. He argued that the federal government owed the Cherokee for their great loss of life and property. But Van Buren had been a supporter of Jackson's policies and did little to aid the Cherokee.

Still, Ross worked tirelessly in support of the Cherokee. Within a few years, they had a new capital, Tahlequah. They built new schools, businesses, and roads. When the Civil War began in 1861, Ross argued that the Cherokee should remain neutral. But the tribe was surrounded by Confederate states, so the tribe eventually aligned with the Confederate government. During the war, Ross met with Abraham Lincoln to discuss the tribe's future. When the war was over, he worked on a new treaty between the government and the Cherokee. It was signed into law on July 27, just a few days before Ross's death, on August 1, 1866.

Ross is remembered as one of the most important figures in Cherokee history. He led them through the difficulties of the Trail of Tears, helped them to rebuild when they had lost hope, and never tired in his support of their rights as a people.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

1. Where did the Cherokee live before their forced removal?
 - A. in the Midwest
 - B. in New England
 - C. in the Southwest
 - D. in the Southeast
2. Why did the United States want the Cherokee to move from their lands?
 - A. so white settlers could move to their region
 - B. because they were disloyal to the government
 - C. so they could live with other Cherokee tribes
 - D. because they thought the Cherokee would prosper in Oklahoma
3. What happened when Ross brought legal action against the state of Georgia?
 - A. President Jackson decided to end the policy of Indian Removal.
 - B. The Supreme Court decided that Georgia had no right to take the Cherokee lands.
 - C. The state of Georgia dropped its policy and let the Cherokee stay.
 - D. The federal government would not let Ross represent his tribe in court.
4. How would you describe John Ross's leadership of the Cherokee people? Provide details and evidence to support your answer.