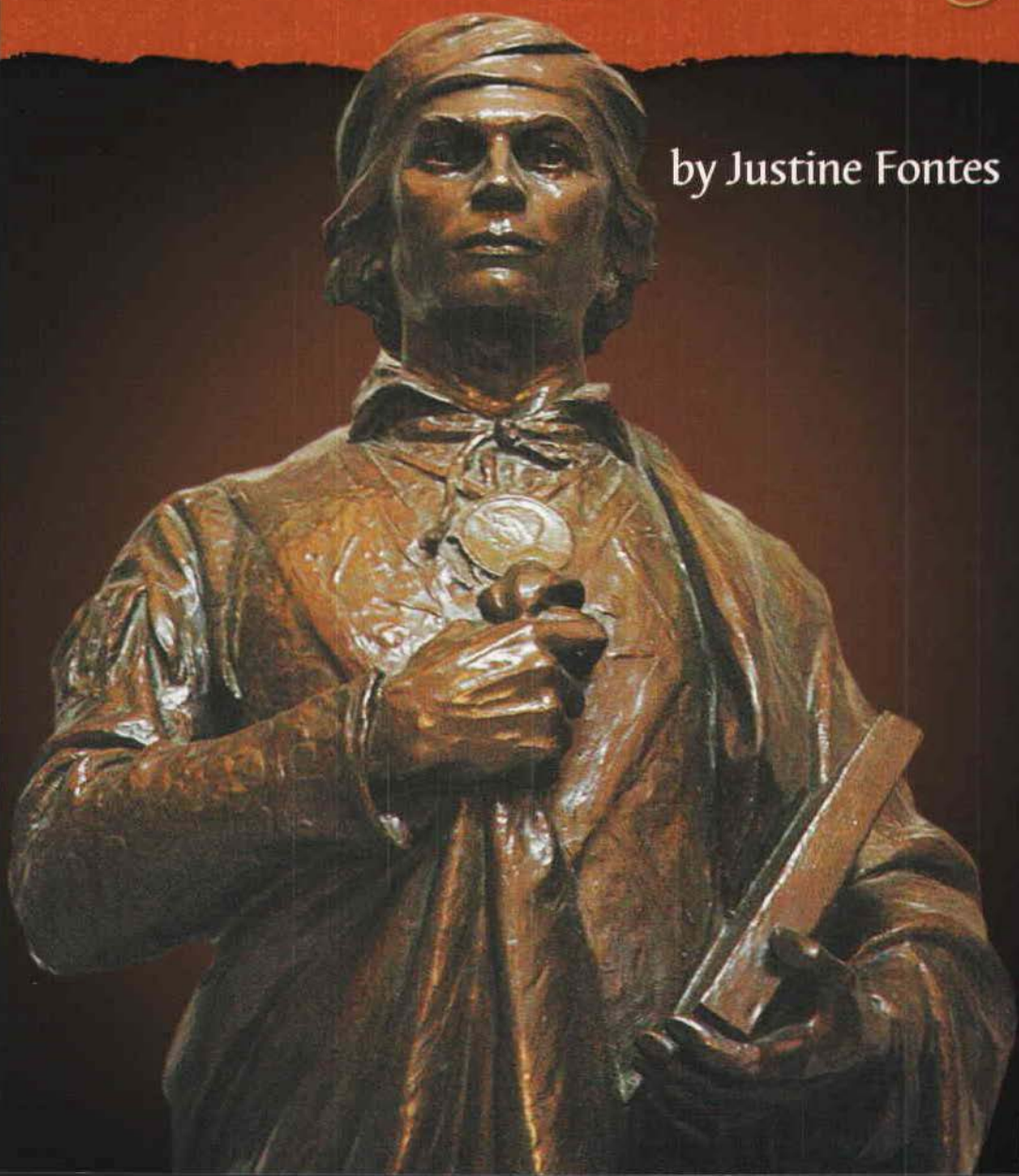


Biography

SEQUOYAH

The Gift of Writing

by Justine Fontes



Read to Find Out

Why did Sequoyah think writing was so important for the Cherokee?

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STRATEGIES & SKILLS AT A GLANCE Comprehension

- Strategy: Summarize
- Skill: Evaluate Author's Purpose

Vocabulary

- acceptance, excitement, proper, single, talented, useful

Vocabulary Strategy

- Context Clues: Word Clues

CONTENT-AREA VOCABULARY

Words related to Sequoyah
(see glossary)

NATIONAL CONTENT STANDARDS

Social Studies

- Individual Development and Identity

Word count: 1,336**

A

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**The total word count is based on words in the running text and headings only. Numerals and words in captions, labels, diagrams, charts, and sidebars are not included.

SEQUOYAH

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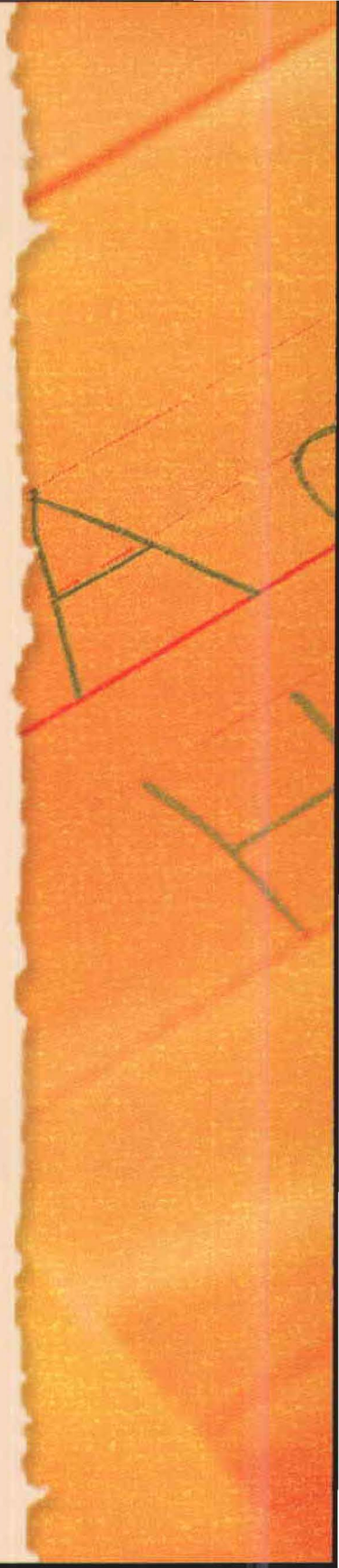
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Introduction

Think about living in a world without an alphabet. People wouldn't be able to send notes to friends or read stories. Everything they learned through the ages would be passed down by word of mouth—or forgotten.

This was true of Native American tribes until 1821. They passed their stories and traditions down orally. Then a talented Cherokee named Sequoyah changed that. He created an alphabet for his people.

The Cherokee Alphabet shares ten ↻ letters with the English alphabet. But some make different sounds.



Cherokee Alphabet.

D _o	R _e	T _i	Ꭰ _o	Ꭱ _u	i _v
S _{ga} Ꭰ _{ka}	F _{ge}	Y _{gi}	A _{go}	J _{gu}	E _{gv}
V _{ha}	P _{he}	A _{hi}	F _{ho}	T _{hu}	G _{hv}
W _{la}	Ꭲ _{te}	S _{ti}	G _{lo}	M _{in}	A _{lv}
Ꭶ _{ma}	O _{me}	H _{mi}	Ꭰ _{mo}	Y _{mu}	
Ꭰ _{na} Ꭰ _{na} G _{nah}	A _{ne}	h _{ni}	Z _{no}	A _{nu}	O _{nv}
T _{qua}	Ꭰ _{que}	P _{qu}	V _{quo}	Ꭰ _{quu}	E _{quv}
U _{sa} Ꭰ _s	A _{se}	B _{si}	F _{so}	Ꭰ _{su}	R _s
U _{da} W _{ta}	S _{de} T _{te}	A _{di} T _{ti}	V _{do}	S _{du}	Ꭰ _{dv}
Ꭰ _{lla} C _{lla}	L _{tte}	C _{tti}	T _{to}	V _{tu}	P _{tlv}
G _{tsa}	V _{tse}	h _{tse}	K _{tso}	J _{tsu}	C _{tsv}
G _{ni}	Ꭰ _{no}	O _{ne}	Ꭰ _{no}	J _{nu}	G _{wv}
Ꭰ _{ya}	B _{ye}	Ꭰ _{ye}	h _{yo}	G _{vu}	B _{yv}

Chapter 1

Young Sequoyah

Some time around 1773, a Cherokee woman named Wuh-teh gave birth to a son named Sequoyah. No one knows the exact date of his birth, because the Cherokee did not keep written records.

Wuh-teh lived with her son in Taskigi, in the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee. Sequoyah's father was a fur trader from Virginia who left Wuh-Teh to raise her son alone. Young Sequoyah walked with a limp, but no one knows for sure how he got it.

📍 This building at the Cherokee National Museum in Oklahoma shows the type of house Sequoyah grew up in.





C When Sequoyah was young, the Cherokee lived in villages and towns all over present-day Tennessee and Kentucky.

A Cherokee boy hunted and fished with the men of his village. He played games that involved running, throwing, and shooting with a bow and arrow. Sequoyah knew he could never be the fastest runner or the best hunter. Still, he must have longed for some way to gain acceptance from his friends.

When Sequoyah was young, the United States was growing. Settlers were taking his nation's lands. They brought along such things as guns and books, which were unknown to the Native Americans.

The settlers and the Native Americans signed **treaties**. These assured the Native Americans that they would be able to stay on their lands. The Cherokee called these treaties "talking leaves" because they contained promises that blew away with the wind. Before long the Cherokee land would be gone.

The Cherokee worried about the nation's future. How could they hold onto their lands? Sequoyah worried too. What could be done about the "talking leaves"? He didn't have the answer then, but he would soon.

Sequoyah moved to a farm in Georgia and became a silversmith. He learned how to melt silver, and then mold it into jewelry and useful objects like buckles and spoons.

Silversmiths often write their names on their work. One day someone asked Sequoyah to sign his work.

Sequoyah went to a Cherokee chief who showed Sequoyah how to write his name in English. It was then that Sequoyah decided to find a way to write in Cherokee.

He drew a picture for every word he knew. He filled piles of birch bark **scrolls** with his charcoal drawings.



➦ Sequoyah worked as a silversmith like this man.

Chapter 2

Sequoyah's Gift

By this time Sequoyah had married and had children. His wife thought his work was foolish. She wanted him to work on their farm. She could not understand why he cared so much about the Cherokee language.

When the War of 1812 began, Sequoyah joined the U.S. Army. As a soldier, Sequoyah saw how useful writing could be. Soldiers wrote letters home to their families. They read maps, lists, and orders. Sequoyah wanted his people to be able to do the same.

The War of 1812

During the War of 1812, the Creek nation fought with the British against the United States. Sequoyah joined other Cherokee fighting on the United States side to keep the British from capturing parts of the United States and Canada.



This building was used during the War of 1812 to defend a nearby town from British attacks.

Pictographs

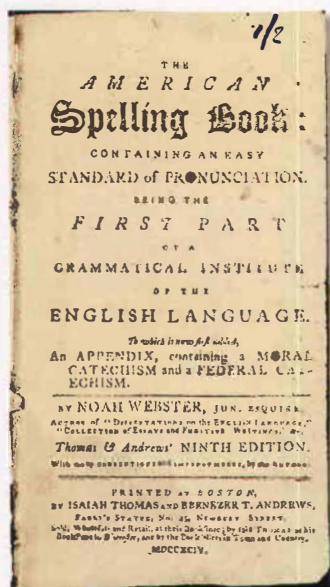
Pictographs are pictures or symbols that represent words, syllables, or sounds. The Ancient Egyptians used pictographs to record their history. Asian alphabets, like Chinese, Korean, and Japanese, are based on pictographs as well.



When Sequoyah returned home, he found that his wife had burned all his scrolls. Now, she thought, he would have to work on the farm. Instead, Sequoyah built a cabin in the woods. He found more birch bark and began his work again.

Sequoyah knew that if he drew a picture for every word, it would take a long time. It would also take a long time for someone to learn. So he decided to create an alphabet based on the sounds in the Cherokee language. Putting the right sounds in the correct order could create any word.

Sequoyah tried to isolate every single sound that made up the Cherokee language. He spent more and more time at work in his cabin. His youngest child and only daughter, Ayoka, often joined him. She seemed to understand that her father's work was important.



Sequoyah used a child's English spelling book to help him come up with symbols for the Cherokee alphabet.



When he wasn't busy working on his alphabet, Sequoyah enjoyed hunting in the woods around his cabin in the Smoky Mountains.



☞ This box held tools for prospectors to use when searching for gold.

In 1821, after twelve long years, Sequoyah finished the alphabet. He had created a **symbol** to stand for each sound in the Cherokee language. The alphabet contains 86 symbols. Sadly, only Ayoka shared his excitement.

Sequoyah knew that his people were in trouble. Cherokee chiefs had signed many treaties, but the Cherokee nation kept losing more land to gold seekers.

Sequoyah hoped his alphabet might help his nation communicate with the settlers. Would the Cherokee chiefs see the value of his gift? Would they understand how it could help them? Sequoyah took young Ayoka with him to a tribal **council** meeting to find out.

Chapter 3

The Tribal Council

No one knows for sure what happened at the tribal council. However, many people think that Ayoka used her father's alphabet to write down what the chiefs said. Her father was in another room so he could not hear them.

Then Sequoyah came in and read aloud what Ayoka had written. The chiefs were pleased. Their spoken words had been turned into written words.

👉 This shows a council meeting in Oklahoma.

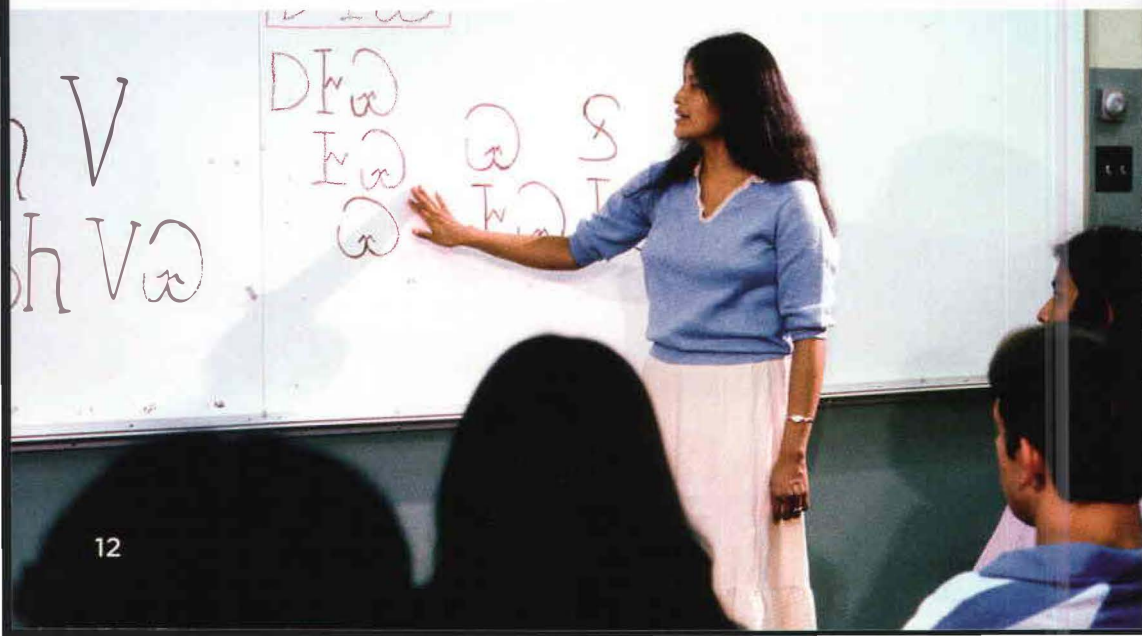


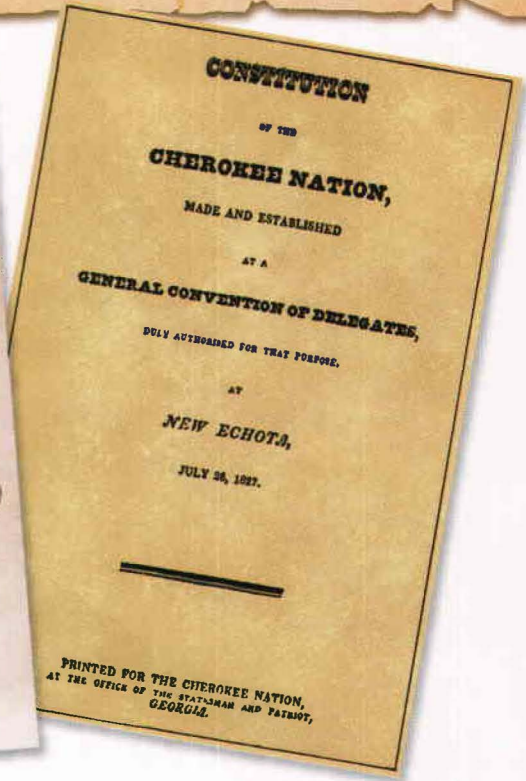
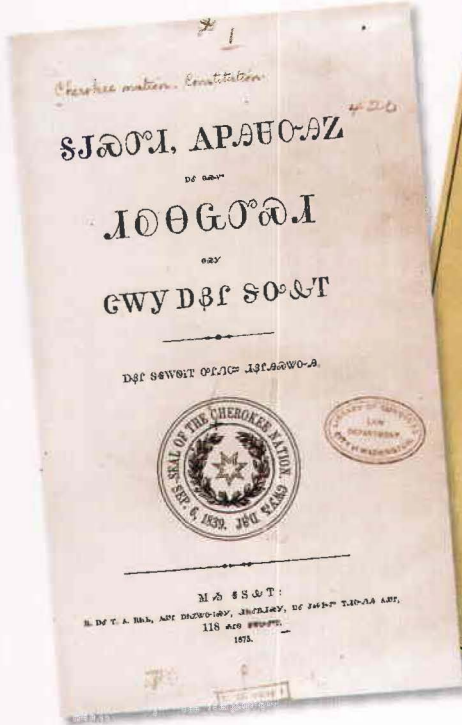
Sequoyah must have been pleased. It was the acceptance he had hoped for. Every chief wanted his smartest people to learn Sequoyah's alphabet. From 1821 to 1822, Sequoyah traveled to Cherokee towns to teach it. Many Cherokee learned to read and write in just two weeks.

Those who learned to read and write taught it to others. In this way, the language spread.

Elders wrote down all the legends, stories, songs, prayers, cures, and recipes they could recall. People wrote letters to one another. Scholars today study those letters to learn how the Cherokee lived.

👉 This woman is teaching Cherokee to Native American teenagers.





Like the U.S. Constitution, the Cherokee Constitution divides its government into three branches.

In 1823, the Cherokee Nation drafted a **constitution**. The Cherokee would now have proper written laws.

Later Sequoyah moved his family to Arkansas. He sold salt, did some mining, and worked in the Cherokee government. In 1824, the Tribal Council gave Sequoyah a silver medal in honor of his work. Sequoyah wore it every day for the rest of his life.



Chapter 4

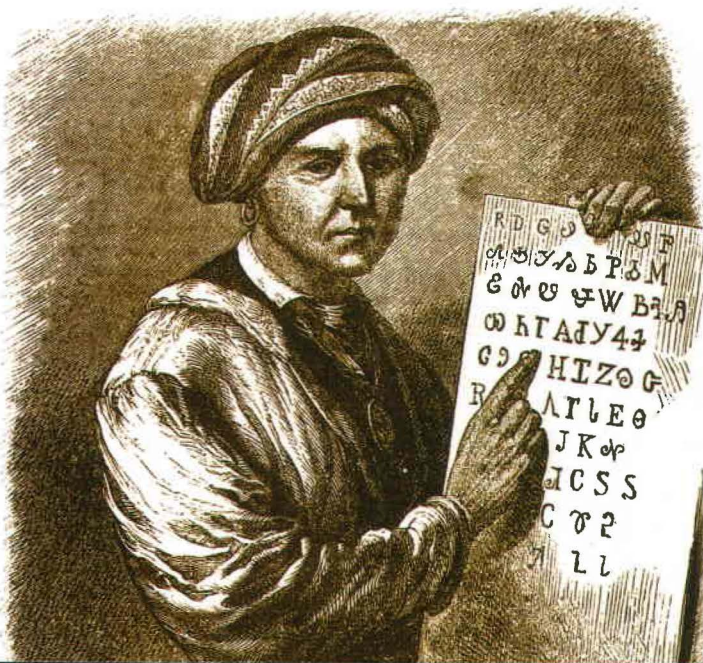
Oklahoma

The Cherokee were a peaceful nation. They were skilled farmers. But they lived on land that settlers wanted.

In 1828 the U.S. government set aside territory in unsettled land that is now Oklahoma. The government planned to move the Cherokee and other nations off the eastern land that settlers wanted to Oklahoma.

Sequoyah hoped that this would not happen. He went to Washington to try to help his people.

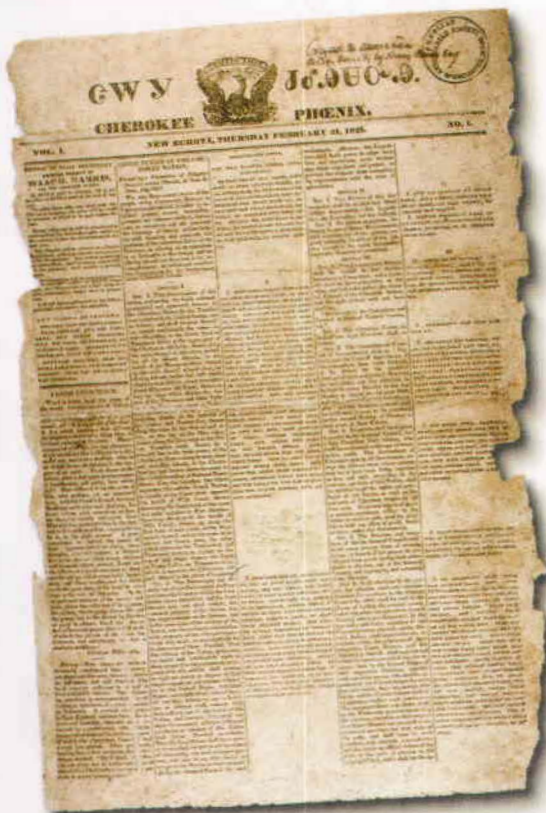
🕒 During his stay in the U.S. capital, Sequoyah's portrait was painted.



The same year, the Cherokee nation published the first Native American newspaper, the *Cherokee Phoenix*. Once the nation had a printing press, more **publications** followed, including a Cherokee Bible. Now the nation had a **voice**. It used this voice to argue against the move to Oklahoma.

Despite this, Congress passed the Indian Removal Act the next year. President Andrew Jackson supported the law. It called for all Cherokee to resettle in Oklahoma.

Sequoyah moved to Oklahoma.



☞ *The Cherokee Phoenix* printed articles arguing against the Indian Removal Act but the Act passed in 1830.



In October 1838, the U.S. Army sent troops to round up the Cherokee and march them to Oklahoma. Over 15,000 Cherokee began the 1,200-mile journey. It was a dangerous trip. About 4,000 died along the way. The Cherokee now call the route they were forced to travel the “Trail of Tears”.

The Qualla Reservation

About 1,000 Cherokee escaped the government and stayed in the Smoky Mountains. These Eastern Cherokee were later able to buy back some of their lost lands. The Cherokee Nation now owns over 60,000 acres of land in western North Carolina known as the Qualla Reservation.





- Sequoyah was the first Native American to have a statue in the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. The state of Oklahoma donated the bronze sculpture in 1917.

Sequoyah was disappointed. Even the power of the press could not stop the Trail of Tears.

The Cherokee would be heard, however. Once they settled in Oklahoma, they started printing the *Phoenix* again. The newspaper became a voice not only for the Cherokee, but for other Native Americans as well.

In Oklahoma, the Cherokee wrote a new constitution and started their own public schools. They printed books in Cherokee. Despite the Trail of Tears, Sequoyah's alphabet helped the Cherokee record and preserve their culture and their way of life.

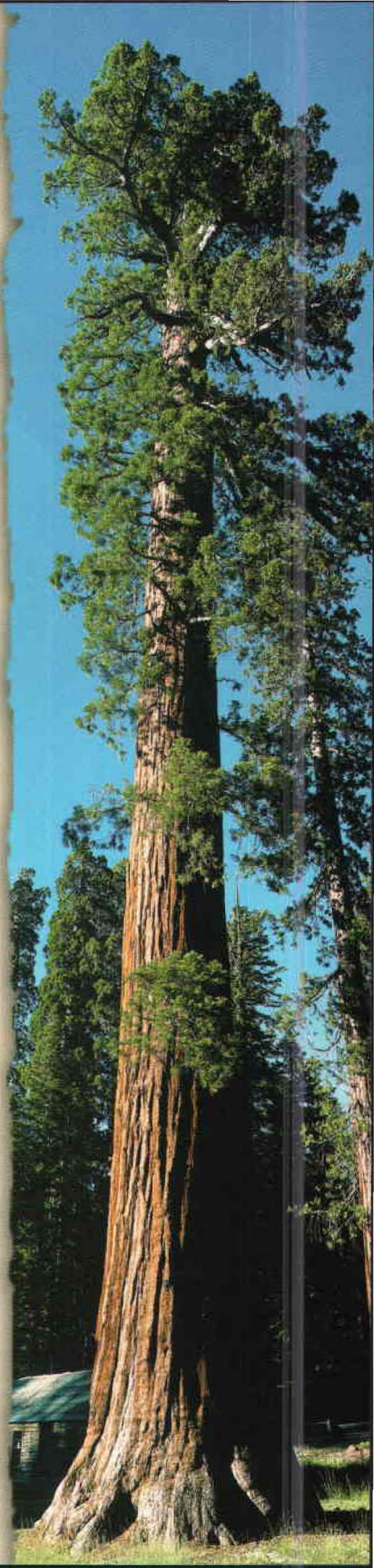
Conclusion

In 1842, Sequoyah went to Mexico to visit a group that had not yet learned his alphabet.

By then, Sequoyah was an old man. He became sick and died while he was there. No one knows where he was buried.

Some people believe that the huge sequoia trees were named to honor Sequoyah. We don't know if this is true or not. The tall trees seem to last forever. And Sequoyah's work will last forever.

[Giant Sequoia, Yosemite National Park, California](#) ↻



Glossary

- constitution** (*kon-sti-TEW-shuhn*) a written document containing the basic laws of a government (**page 13**)
- council** (*KOWN-suhl*) a group of people called together to discuss a problem or other matter (**page 10**)
- publication** (*pub-li-KAY-shuhn*) a magazine, newspaper, book, or other printed material that is published (**page 15**)
- scroll** (*SKROHL*) a roll of paper, parchment, bark, or other writing material (**page 6**)
- symbol** (*SIM-buhl*) something that stands for something else (**page 10**)
- treaty** (*TREE-tee*) a formal agreement between countries regarding peace or trade (**page 5**)
- voice** (*VOYS*) the right to express a view, opinion, or choice (**page 15**)
-

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Comprehension Check

Summarize

Complete the Author's Purpose Chart. Use the chart to record clues that tell why the author wrote about Sequoyah. Then summarize the information.

Clues

↓

Author's Purpose

Think and Compare

1. Reread pages 10-11. Why was Sequoyah eager for the Cherokee chiefs to understand and accept his new alphabet? (**Evaluate Author's Purpose**)
2. Explain a time when you had difficulty getting others to understand you. What did you finally do to be understood? (**Synthesize**)
3. People can defend their lands with the pen or the sword. Which do you think is the best way? Explain. (**Evaluate**)

Literacy Activities



Write an Alphabet

Make up your own symbols for the sounds of our alphabet. Use your symbols to write a few facts about Sequoyah.



Native American Nations

Choose another Native American nation such as the Apache. Do some research. Compare the nation to the Cherokee. Tell how they were alike and how they were different.

SEQUOYAH: The Gift of Writing

It took 12 years for Sequoyah to create the written Cherokee alphabet. Find out how he did it.



3.2 Week 5

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