

Cherokee Indian Fact Sheet

Cherokee Facts For Kids was written for young people in search of Cherokee Indian information for school or home-schooling reports. We encourage students and teachers to visit our main [Cherokee](#) website for more in-depth information, but here are our answers to the questions children most often ask us, with Cherokee pictures and links we believe are suitable for all ages.

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Native American Facts For Kids



●●● Cherokee Tribe ●●●

● ***How do you pronounce the word "Cherokee"? What does it mean?***

Cherokee is pronounced "CHAIR-uh-kee." It comes from a [Muskogee](#) word meaning 'speakers of another language.' Cherokee Indians originally called themselves *Aniyunwiya*, "the principal people," but today they accept the name Cherokee, which is spelled and pronounced *Tsalagi* in their own language.

● ***Where do the Cherokee Indians live?***

The Cherokees are original residents of the American southeast region, particularly

[Georgia](#), [North](#) and [South Carolina](#), [Virginia](#), [Kentucky](#), and [Tennessee](#). Here is a [map](#) showing the location of the original Cherokee territory. Most Cherokees were forced to move to Oklahoma in the 1800's along the Trail of Tears. Descendants of the Cherokee Indians who survived this death march still live in Oklahoma today. Some Cherokees escaped the Trail of Tears by hiding in the Appalachian hills or taking shelter with sympathetic white neighbors. The descendants of these people live scattered throughout the original Cherokee Indian homelands.

● **What was the Cherokee Trail of Tears?**

Trail of Tears was the Cherokee name for what the Americans called **Indian Removal**. During the 1800's, the US government created an "Indian Territory" in Oklahoma and sent all the eastern Native American tribes to live there. Some tribes willingly agreed to this plan. Other tribes didn't want to go, and the American army forced them. The Cherokee tribe was one of the largest eastern tribes, and they didn't want to leave their homeland. The Cherokees were peaceful allies of the Americans, so they asked the Supreme Court for help. The judges decided the Cherokee Indians could stay in their homes. But the President, Andrew Jackson, sent the army to march the Cherokees to Oklahoma anyway. They weren't prepared for the journey, and it was wintertime. Thousands of Cherokee Indians died on the Trail of Tears. Many Native Americans from other tribes died too. It was a terrible time in history.

Here are memories of the Cherokee Trail of Tears from two 19th-century writers, a [Cherokee Indian who walked the Trail as a boy](#) and an [American soldier who accompanied the Cherokees](#).

● **How is the Cherokee Indian nation organized?**

There are three **federally recognized** Cherokee tribes: the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, the United Keetoowah Band in Oklahoma, and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in North Carolina. Other Cherokee communities in Alabama, Georgia, and other states are considered unofficial by the US government. The Eastern Cherokee people live on a **reservation**. Indian reservations are lands that belong to Native American tribes and are under their control. The Oklahoma Cherokee people live on trust land, though many Cherokees call it a reservation anyway. The Keetowah Cherokee do not have a land base. Each Cherokee tribe has its own government, laws, police, and services, just like a small country. However, Cherokee Indians are also US citizens and must obey American law.

In the past, each Cherokee band was led by one war chief and one peace chief. Cherokee chiefs were chosen by a tribal council. Cherokee war chiefs were male, but the peace chief could be a woman. Today, Cherokee tribal councils and chiefs can be either gender and are popularly elected, like senators and governors.

● **What language do the Cherokees speak?**

Most Cherokee people speak English today, but 20,000 people also speak the **Cherokee Indian language**. Cherokee is a complex language with soft sounds. If you'd like to know a few easy Cherokee words, "osiyo" (pronounced oh-see-yoh) is a friendly greeting, and "wado" (pronounced wah-doh) means 'thank you.' You can hear Cherokee being spoken

[here](#), or read a Cherokee picture dictionary [here](#).

The Cherokee language has an innovative writing system that was invented by the Cherokee scholar Sequoyah. Sequoyah's writing system is a **syllabary**. That means one character represents each syllable. (Another language that uses a syllabary today is Japanese.) Here is a chart of the symbols used in the [written Cherokee language](#). Today, many Cherokee people use a modified English alphabet instead of the syllabary Sequoyah invented, because it is easier to type.

● ***What was Cherokee culture like in the past? what is it like now?***

Here are links to the [Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma](#) and [Eastern Band of Cherokees](#), where you can learn about the Cherokee people past and present.

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● ***How do Cherokee Indian children live?***

They do the same things all children do--play with each other, go to school and help around the house. Many Cherokee children enjoy hunting and fishing with their fathers. In the past, Cherokee kids had more chores and less time to play, just like colonial children. But they did have [dolls](#), toys, and games to play. In one popular game, Cherokee kids tried to throw a dart through a moving hoop. Anejodi, a [stickball](#) game related to the Iroquois game of lacrosse, was a popular sport among Cherokee teenagers and adult men. Like many Native Americans, Cherokee mothers traditionally carried babies in [cradle board](#) carriers on their backs--a custom which many American parents have [adopted](#) now.

● ***What were men and women's roles in the Cherokee tribe?***

Like their distant cousins the [Iroquois](#), the Cherokee Indians had an even division of power between men and women. Cherokee men were in charge of hunting, war, and diplomacy. Cherokee women were in charge of farming, property, and family. Men made political decisions for the tribe, and women made social decisions for the clans. Chiefs were men, and landowners were women. Both genders took part in storytelling, artwork and music, and traditional medicine.

Today, Cherokee gender role traditions have changed. Cherokee women can be chiefs also... and Cherokee men are sometimes farmers. However, modern Cherokee people still trace clan relationships through their mothers.

● ***What were Cherokee homes like?***

The Cherokee Indians lived in settled villages, usually located near a river. Cherokee houses were made of rivercane and plaster, with thatched roofs. These dwellings were about as strong and warm as log cabins. Here are some pictures of [Native American houses](#) like the ones Cherokee Indians used. The Cherokees also built larger seven-sided buildings for ceremonial purposes, and each village usually had a ball field with benches for spectators. Many Cherokee villages had **palisades** (reinforced walls) around them for protection. Today, Cherokee families live in a modern house or apartment building, just like you.

● ***What was Cherokee clothing like? Did they wear feather headdresses and face paint?***

Cherokee men wore [breechcloths and leggings](#). Cherokee women wore wraparound skirts and poncho-style blouses made out of woven fiber or deerskin. The Cherokees wore [moccasins](#) on their feet. After colonization, Cherokee Indians adapted European costume into a characteristic style, including long braided or beaded jackets, cotton blouses and full skirts decorated with ribbon applique, feathered turbans, and the calico [tear dress](#). Here are pictures of [Cherokee clothing](#) and photographs of [traditional Native American clothing](#) in general.

The Cherokees didn't wear long headdresses like the [Sioux](#). Cherokee men usually shaved their heads except for a single [scalplock](#). Sometimes they would also wear a [porcupine roach](#). Cherokee women always wore their hair long, cutting it only in mourning for a family member. Men decorated their faces and bodies with [tribal tattoo art](#) and also painted themselves bright colors in times of war. Unlike some tribes, Cherokee women didn't paint themselves or wear tattoos, but they often wore bead necklaces and copper armbands.

Today, some Cherokee people still wear moccasins or a ribbon shirt, but they wear modern clothes like jeans instead of a breechcloth... and only wear roaches and feathers on special occasions like a dance.

● ***What was early Cherokee transportation like? Did they paddle canoes?***

Yes--the Cherokee Indians used to make long dugout canoes from hollowed-out logs. Here is an article with pictures of [Native canoes](#). Over land, the Cherokees used dogs as pack animals. There were no horses in North America until colonists brought them over from Europe. Today, of course, Cherokee people also use cars... and non-native people also use canoes.

● ***What was Cherokee food like in the days before supermarkets?***

The Cherokees were farming people. Cherokee women harvested crops of corn, beans,

squash, and sunflowers. They also gathered berries, nuts and fruit to eat. Cherokee men hunted deer, wild turkeys, and small game and fished in the rivers. Cherokee foods included cornbread, soups, and stews cooked on stone hearths. Here is a website with some [Cherokee recipes](#) you can try out for yourself, and a page with more information about [Native American food](#) in general.

● ***What were some Cherokee weapons and artifacts?***

Cherokee hunters used bows and arrows or blowguns to shoot game. Fishermen generally used spears and fishing poles. Warriors fired arrows or fought with a melee weapon like a tomahawk or spear. Here is a website with pictures and more information about [Cherokee Indian weapons](#). Other important tools used by the Cherokee Indians included stone adzes (hand axes for woodworking), flint knives for skinning animals, wooden hoes for farming, and pots and baskets for storing corn.

● ***What are Cherokee arts and crafts?***

Traditional Cherokee art included [pipe carving](#), [rivercane baskets](#), [gourd art](#), and [pottery](#). After moving to Oklahoma, the Cherokees couldn't get the materials they used to use for traditional crafts, so they concentrated on other crafts like [American Indian beading](#) and [textile arts](#). Here are photographs of beautiful [beaded Cherokee bandolier bags](#), and a [Cherokee artifact display](#) from North Carolina.

● ***What other Native Americans did the Cherokee tribe interact with?***

The Cherokee Indians traded regularly with other southeastern Native Americans, who especially liked to make trades for high-quality Cherokee pipes and pottery. The Cherokees often fought with their neighbors the [Creeks](#), [Chickasaws](#), and [Shawnees](#), but other times, they were friends and allies of those tribes.

● ***I read that the Cherokee were part of the Five Civilized Tribes. Was that an alliance like the Iroquois Confederacy?***

No. Many people guess this, but it isn't true. "The Five Civilized Tribes" was just a name that the white settlers used to refer to the [Creek](#), [Chickasaw](#), [Choctaw](#), [Seminole](#), and Cherokee tribes of the Southeast. These five tribes were never part of an alliance together, and they did not call themselves the Civilized Tribes in their own languages. Originally, the white settlers probably called them this because these five tribes were early converts to Christianity. They were also farmers who lived in settled towns under sophisticated government systems, which Europeans and early Americans considered more higher civilization achievements than independent bands of hunters who moved from place to place. However, there were dozens of other Native American tribes who also led farming lifestyles, not just these five.

● ***What kinds of stories do the Cherokees tell?***

There are many traditional Cherokee legends and fairy tales. Story-telling is very important to the Cherokee Indian culture. Here is a Cherokee legend about the [origin of strawberries](#). Here's a website where you can read more about [Cherokee mythology](#).

● ***What about Cherokee religion?***

Religions are too complicated and culturally sensitive to describe appropriately in only a few simple sentences, and we strongly want to avoid misleading anybody. You can visit this site to learn more about [Cherokee ceremonies](#) or this site about [American Indian spirituality](#) in general.

● ***Who are some famous Cherokee Indians?***

One of the best-known people in Cherokee history was [Sequoyah](#). Sequoyah was a very brilliant man. Although he did not know how to read or write in any other language, he succeeded in inventing a writing system for Cherokee that is still used today. A famous Cherokee Indian from modern times is [Wilma Mankiller](#), the first woman to be Principal Chief of the Cherokee tribe.

● ***Can you recommend a good book for me to read?***

You may enjoy [Indian Shoes](#), a charming collection of short stories about a contemporary Cherokee-Seminole boy and his grandfather, or [Aunt Mary, Tell Me A Story](#), a collection of traditional tales retold by a Cherokee elder. If you want to know more about the Trail of Tears and Cherokee history, two good books for kids are [Only the Names Remain](#) and [Soft Rain](#). Older readers may be interested in [Voices from the Trail of Tears](#) or [Cherokee Women](#). You can also browse through our reading list of recommended [American Indian books](#) in general.

● ***How do I cite your website in my bibliography?***

You will need to ask your teacher for the format he or she wants you to use. The authors' names are Laura Redish and Orrin Lewis and the title of our site is Native Languages of the Americas. We are a nonprofit educational organization working to preserve and protect Native American languages and culture. You can learn more about our organization [here](#). Our website was first created in 1998 and last updated in 2015.

Thanks for your interest in the Cherokee Indian people!

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