

Article

Sequoyah—Cherokee Alphabet Maker

Part 1

Did you write or read something today? What if no one in your community could read and write? People would share news by word of mouth. Would the news change as people told it over and over? Many years ago, life was like that for the Cherokee Indians. But one man changed all that. His name was Sequoyah.

Sequoyah was born in the 1770s in Tennessee. His mother was Cherokee. His father was a white fur trader. His Cherokee name, Sequoyah, means “pig’s foot.” The name probably came from a problem he had with his foot. The problem didn’t keep him from living a full life. He hunted at an early age. Sequoyah also had an English name—George Gist.

Part 2

Symbols for Words

Sequoyah moved to Georgia when he was a teenager. There he learned to be a silversmith. He saw that white silversmiths used letter symbols to sign their work. But Sequoyah couldn’t do this. He couldn’t read or write English. And the Cherokee didn’t have their own written language.

Many of Sequoyah’s friends thought the white man’s writing was witchcraft. But Sequoyah did not agree. He knew that the symbols stood for words. What if the Cherokee could write in their own language? He began thinking about a plan for a Cherokee writing system.

Part 3

Writing Goes the Distance

As an adult, Sequoyah joined the army. He fought with the Americans in the War of 1812. He still thought about writing and its uses. Unlike white soldiers, Sequoyah and other Cherokee couldn’t write letters home. They couldn’t read war orders. Sequoyah realized that writing could allow him to communicate across distances. When the war ended, Sequoyah made a decision. He would create a written language for his people.

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Sequoyah—Cherokee Alphabet Maker *(Continued)*

Part 4

A New Written Language

Sequoyah first tried to make a symbol for each Cherokee word. But he needed too many symbols. So he made an alphabet with 85 symbols. Each symbol stood for a Cherokee sound. He taught the alphabet to his young daughter. She easily learned it.

Many Cherokee thought Sequoyah was crazy. He was put on trial for being a witch. Cherokee warriors were the judges. During the trial, they put Sequoyah and his daughter in different places. They were told to use Sequoyah's symbols to write messages to each other. They did. Each was easily able to read aloud the message that the other sent.

Soon the warriors saw that the symbols stood for talking. The warriors asked Sequoyah to teach them to use his symbols. In one week, they learned to read and write. In less than a year, thousands of Cherokee could read and write in their own language. In 1821, the Cherokee Nation adopted Sequoyah's alphabet.

Making History

Sequoyah was a hero to his people when he died in 1843. His gift to his people helped them share information. Writing did not only help communicate across distances. It also allowed the Cherokee to communicate across time. The Cherokee could write down their history and culture. They could share their story with those that would live after them.