

Ocmulgee Mounds

National Park Service
U.S. Department of Interior

Ocmulgee Mounds NHP



Muscogee (Creek) Removal



DISSENTION AND DIVISION

After the Revolutionary War, a new wave of American settlers poured into Georgia seeking claims to rich river bottomland. This land was perfect for growing cotton, a crop made highly profitable by the invention of the cotton gin in 1793. The Creek Indians, who had always been excellent farmers, adapted quickly to a cotton-based economy. But American settlers wanted the land for themselves and saw the Creek Indians as obstacles to “progress.” Pressure increased on the federal government to remove all Indians to areas west of the Mississippi River. In an attempt to protect themselves, the Creek Council passed a law providing the death penalty for anyone ceding land without the Council’s authority.

The Creeks were divided over the issue of removal. Many, including Chief William McIntosh, remained loyal to the United States government, believing voluntary removal was the only way to escape complete annihilation. Others, however, wanted to go back to their way of living before the settlers’ influences. This division eventually led to civil war. The “Red Sticks,” so called because of the red club that they carried, became militant, preferring to remain in their homeland and pursue their traditional way of life. The Creek Indian War, begun in 1813, was a result of these conflicts. The Red Sticks attacked settlers and loyalist Creeks and the United States struck back with forces led by General Andrew Jackson. Ultimately the Red Sticks lost, and the war ended with the Treaty of Fort Jackson in 1814, which ceded 23 million acres of Creek land to the United States.

PUSHED OUT OF GEORGIA

After 1814 a series of treaties whittled away at the Creek lands, pushing them further and further out of Georgia. By 1823 Georgia Governor George Troup saw the Creeks as a serious problem. At one time the “savagery” of the Indians had helped justify the acquisition of land, but many Indians were following the European model of civilization. Settlers feared wresting land from these “civilized” Indians would be more difficult. Troup and his constituents wanted the Indians to be moved to the Western Territory of the Louisiana Purchase, an idea proposed by Thomas Jefferson in 1803. They wanted all Indians out of Georgia.

In 1825 the second Treaty of Indian Springs, signed by Chief William McIntosh,

ceded all Lower Creek land in Georgia. Not only had Troup and members of the state government manipulated McIntosh into signing, but McIntosh did so without a clear mandate from his people. He and several other leaders were killed for their involvement. President John Quincy Adams declared the treaty illegal and in January 1826 negotiated the second Treaty of Washington with the Creeks. Although this treaty was nearly as corrupt as the Treaty of Indian Springs, Governor Troup refused to honor it and continued forced removal. When Adams threatened Troup with federal intervention, Troup prepared the state militia, and Adams backed down, saying “The Indians are not worth going to war over.” By 1827, the Creeks were gone from Georgia.

FEDERAL INVOLVEMENT IN REMOVAL

Andrew Jackson was elected president of the United States in 1829, and with his inauguration the government stance

toward Indians turned harsher. Jackson abandoned the policy of his predecessors of treating different Indian groups as

separate nations. Instead, he aggressively pursued plans to move all Indian tribes living east of the Mississippi River to Oklahoma. At Jackson's request, the United States Congress opened a fierce debate on an Indian Removal Bill. In the end, the bill passed, but the vote was close. The Senate passed the measure 28 to 19, while in the House it squeaked by, 102 to 97. Jackson signed the legislation into law June 30, 1830.

For those who migrated, the government agreed to pay transportation costs and to finance their subsistence for one year. About 1,300, mostly members of the McIntosh faction, resettled to the valley of the Arkansas River in "Indian Territory," now the state of Oklahoma, on lands given to them in perpetuity under the government's removal program. Some of the Creeks joined their Seminole relatives in Florida; many moved into Alabama. But most opposed the idea of moving west. They had no desire to leave their homelands and many had adopted European ways as the federal government once urged. They owned farms and cattle, and some owned slaves.

Voluntary removal proved too slow for the ever-growing tide of settlers, and the

government stepped up its efforts to get the Creek Chiefs to sign a treaty removing them to Indian Territory. On March 24, 1832, Indian delegates signed a treaty giving up part of their land in Alabama, the rest would be allotted – 320 acres for each family and 640 acres for each chief.

The families could stay on their allotments or sell them and move west at government expense to lands where they were promised autonomy. Those who stayed were subjected to the violence of white settlers who invaded Indian farmsteads, beating, murdering, raping, and driving the natives off. Other Indians lost their land to the speculators swindles and the state government supported it all. In retaliation several chiefs, including Eneah Emathla, and Jim Henry, led warriors in attacks on white settlements. Their most devastating assault came at the small community of Roanoke, just south of the Fort Benning area in Stewart County, Georgia, where Hitchiti Indians killed 12 people and torched the town. Thus began the Creek War of 1836. On at least two occasions, Creek Indians also attacked steamboats carrying troops. However, the Creeks and their allies were soon overwhelmed. Many were rounded up and held at Fort Mitchell to await transportation out.

TRAIL OF TEARS

When the war ended in July 1836, about 2,500 Creeks, including several hundred chained warriors, were marched on foot to Montgomery and onto barges which were pushed down the Alabama River, beginning their forced removal to a new homeland in Indian Territory.

Removal paused when conflicts erupted with the Seminoles further south and a force of 700 Lower Creek warriors agreed to patrol Florida in support of the American military. About 4,000 Creeks, including the warriors' families, were moved to concentration camps in Mobile, Alabama in March 1837 supposedly for their own protection. However, mobs from Alabama and Georgia broke in and ransacked the camps, raping, killing and enslaving. Some of the Indians fled into nearby swamps, only to be hunted down by the Alabama militia. The Lower Creek warriors returned from Florida in October to find only remnants of their families in the camps. They were promptly herded to New Orleans and loaded onto nine old steamboats for the trip up the Mississippi. During the trip, one steamboat collided with a ship and was cut in half, killing 311 Creeks.

During the summer and winter of 1836 and 1837, over 14,000 Creeks made the three-month journey to Oklahoma, a trip of over 800 land miles and another 400 by water. Most left with only what they could carry wearing inadequate clothing for the winter travel. Creeks who had intermarried with the Cherokee or lived within the Chickasaw Nation in Mississippi were hunted out and forced to emigrate. Some of the Creeks, mostly children, were held by whites in bondage as slaves.

The overall effect of the Creek Trail of Tears was staggering. 21,792 Creeks lived in Georgia and Alabama in 1832. Twenty years after the "removal" ended, only 13,537 Creeks remained in Oklahoma. Some 8,000 people apparently had died. Counted as a percentage of their population, the Creeks and related tribes suffered more deaths than the Cherokee in their own, far better-known trail of tears. The once-mighty Creek Nation was down, but its spirit was not destroyed. Despite continued hardships, its citizens carved a new life for themselves in Oklahoma. Today, their descendants remain a proud and sovereign people.