

## Native Americans in the American Revolution

In the 1750s, the area west of the Allegheny Mountains was a vast forest. American Indians primarily from three nations – the Seneca, the Lenape or Delaware, and the Shawnee – inhabited the upper Ohio River Valley.

About 3,000 to 4,000 American Indians were living there. The population of all the Indian nations in northeastern North America was about 175,000.

A few French and British traders traveled through the area.

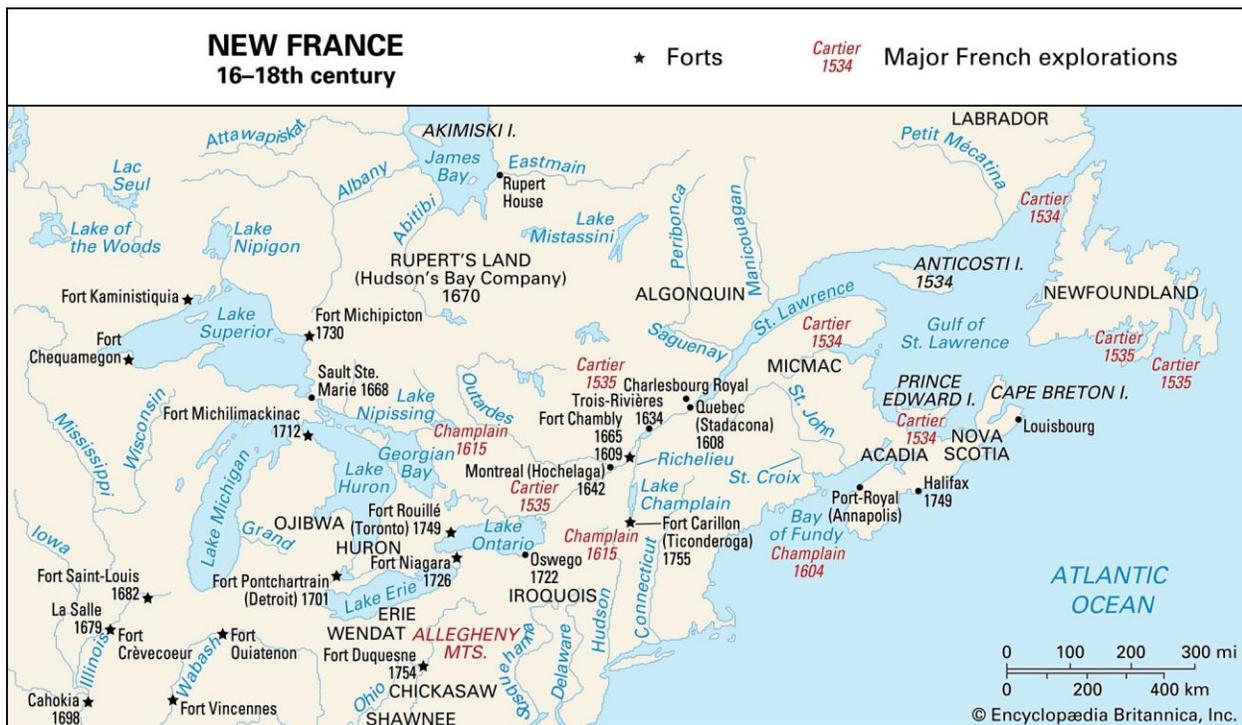
New France had three colonies: Canada (along the St. Lawrence River), the Illinois country (the mid-Mississippi Valley), and Louisiana (New Orleans and west of the Mississippi).

There were about 70,000 colonists throughout the French settlements. Their economy was based on trade with the American Indians. It was a weak economic system, and the colonies were not self-sustaining.

To the east of the Allegheny Mountains lived more than 1 million colonists in the 13 British colonies. They had a strong economy based on farming. Their population was expanding rapidly, both through immigration and population growth.

Although they had no settlers in the Ohio River Valley in 1750, the British colonies claimed the land.

The border between French and British possessions was not well defined, and one disputed territory was the upper Ohio River valley. The French had constructed a number of forts in this region in an attempt to strengthen their claim on the territory.



## **What The French and Indian War Was About**

The Ohio River Valley Indians wanted to maintain their land, their lifestyle, and control of their future. They sought to trade with the Europeans but prevent settlement.

As the British colonists settled that land, the Indians moved west. The Shawnee and Delaware in the Ohio River Valley were under the political influence of the Iroquois Confederacy. They didn't like this and wanted to speak for themselves. The Iroquois Confederacy wanted to maintain control of the Ohio River Valley to improve its negotiating position with the French and British.

The French depended on the Indian trade as the basis of their economy. They were upset when Pennsylvania and Virginia started trading with the Ohio River Valley Indians. This area was on the eastern edge of their main trading routes, and they did not want to lose control of any of the trade.

Also, they used the Ohio River Valley and its river systems as a transportation route. They wanted their traders, priests, and soldiers to be able to travel freely through the region. The French were not interested in settling the area. However, they were determined to maintain authority over it. By the 1750s British colonial settlement had reached the eastern base of the Allegheny Mountains.

On the night of May 27, 1754, British lieutenant colonel George Washington and 40 soldiers began a dark and wet overnight march. It was morning before they arrived at the Half King's camp. Together they decided to surround the French.

Then, the shot was fired. This skirmish invited retaliation from the French and their American Indian allies. Although officially not at war, both France and Britain supported the fighting by sending troops and supplies.

The war in North America settled into a stalemate for the next several years, while in Europe the French scored an important naval victory and captured the British possession of Minorca in the Mediterranean in 1756. However, after 1757 the war began to turn in favor of Great Britain. British forces defeated French forces in India, and in 1759 British armies invaded and conquered Canada.

Facing defeat in North America and a tenuous position in Europe, the French Government attempted to engage the British in peace negotiations. After these negotiations failed, Spanish King Charles III offered to come to the aid of his cousin, French King Louis XV, and their representatives signed an alliance known as the Family Compact on August 15, 1761.

Originally intended to pressure the British into a peace agreement, the Family Compact ultimately reinvigorated the French will to continue the war, and caused the British Government to declare war on Spain on January 4, 1762, after bitter infighting among King George III's ministers.

Despite facing such a formidable alliance, British naval strength and Spanish ineffectiveness led to British success. British forces seized French Caribbean islands, Spanish Cuba, and the Philippines. Fighting in Europe ended after a failed Spanish invasion of British ally Portugal. By 1763, French and Spanish diplomats began to seek peace. In the resulting Treaty of Paris (1763), Great Britain secured significant territorial gains in North America, including all French territory east of the Mississippi river, as well as Spanish Florida, although the treaty returned Cuba to Spain.



**THE FIRST AMERICANS: LOCATION OF MAJOR INDIAN GROUPS AND CULTURE AREAS IN THE 1600s**

## **Then, the American Revolution**

The relationship between native peoples and the emerging United States during the era of the American Revolution was a complicated one. From the onset of Lord Dunmore's War in 1774 to the Treaty of Paris in 1783, Indians in North America faced a dilemma on whether they would fight, for whom they would fight, and why they would fight.

Most Native Americans initially thought that the Revolution was an isolated disagreement between white colonists and their mother country.

However, the Revolutionary War evolved into a continent-wide struggle that the Indians could not avoid. Individual Indians joined both the Continental and British armies as regular soldiers or as scouts, guides, mariners, and diplomats.

Indian involvement in the American Revolution has often been interpreted as the story of a people who picked the wrong side, lost, and were destined to move west and disappear. However, history shows that Native Americans not only participated in the American Revolution, but also survived the long-term changes it produced. (Merritt)

## **Native Americans in the Revolutionary War**

Many Native American tribes fought in the Revolutionary War. The majority of these tribes fought for the British but a few fought for the Americans. Many of these tribes tried to remain neutral in the early phase of the war but when some of them came under attack by American militia, they decided to join the British.

Other tribes joined the British in the hopes that if the British won, they would put a stop to colonial expansion in the west, as they had done with the Royal Proclamation of 1763. Rebecca Beatrice Brooks provides a list of the various tribes who fought in the Revolutionary War:

### **Wabanaki Confederacy**

The Wabanaki Confederacy was an alliance of five northern tribes: the Penobscot, Maliseet, Passamaquoddy, Abenaki and Micmac. They were situated generally in Maine and New Brunswick.

The tribes of the Wabanaki Confederacy were reluctant to join the war effort but some members of the various tribes did take part in a few engagements. According to Colin Galloway's book *The American Revolution in Indian Country*:

In Maine and Nova Scotia, Passamaquoddies, Micmacs, and Maliseets were reluctant to become involved in a war that had little to offer them. ...

About a hundred principal men of the Micmac, Maliseet, and Passamaquoddy tribes took an oath of allegiance to King George between September 1778 to January 1779.

With chief Ornon 'hearty in our cause,' a company of Penobscots served in the United States and figured prominently in the action at Penobscot in 1779. A dozen Pigwackets from western Maine petitioned Massachusetts for permission to enlist. (Colin G. Calloway, in Brooks)

## Stockbridge-Mohican Tribe

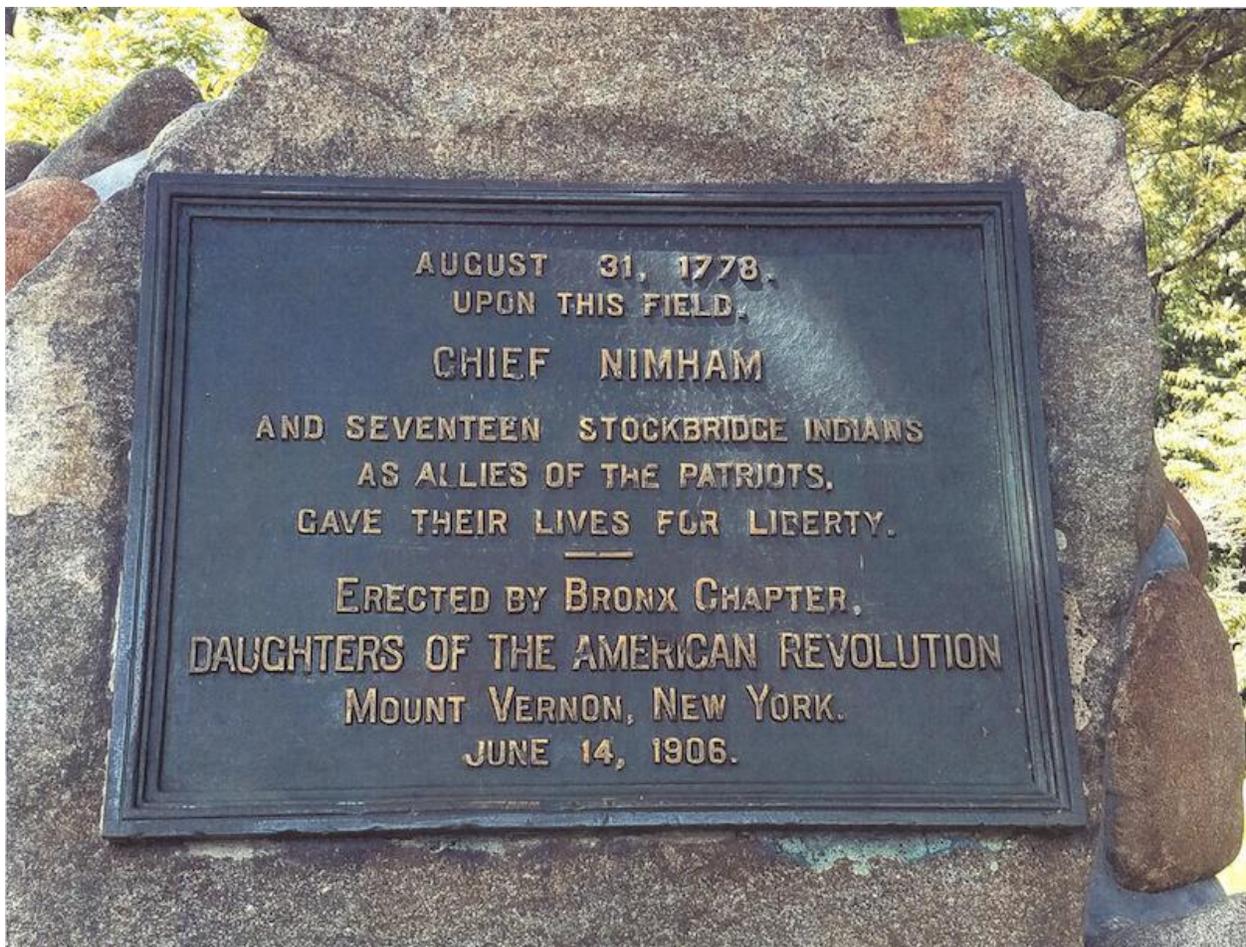
The Stockbridge-Mohican, a tribe who lived in Western Massachusetts, sided with the Americans in the Revolutionary War, even though they had been long-standing allies of the British and even served in militia units during King George's War, the French and Indian War and Pontiac's Uprising.

The Stockbridge Mohicans went on to fight in some of the earliest battles of the war and were reportedly among the militiamen at Lexington and Concord in April of 1775.

Mohican warriors are said to have lined up alongside American militiamen along Battle Road and fired upon British soldiers as they marched back to Boston and then joined the militiamen in Cambridge as they besieged the British army within Boston.

Although George Washington was reluctant to allow the Stockbridge Mohicans to officially join the Continental Army, he eventually had a change of heart and allowed them to enlist.

In the 1780s, the Stockbridge moved to New York to escape encroachment by white settlers in Massachusetts and lived alongside the Oneida tribe and also migrated to present-day Wisconsin where they were later joined by a group of the Delaware people known as the Munsee.



## **Shawnee Tribe**

The Shawnee, a tribe who lived in the Ohio River Valley sided with the British during the Revolutionary War. When the Revolutionary War first broke out, most Shawnee tried to remain neutral. American encroachment on Shawnee land persisted though and the tribe soon became divided on the issue.

Shawnee tribes that had already allied themselves with the British threatened other Shawnee tribes with attack if they sided with the colonists. As concern over American encroachment on Shawnee land grew, more Shawnee sided with the British in the spring of 1778.

The Shawnee and the Americans continued to fight long after the war was over as more and more white settlers began to encroach on Shawnee land.

## **Delaware Tribe**

The Delaware (also known as the Lenni Lenape), a tribe in the Ohio Valley. The Delaware were originally neutral at the outbreak of the war but quickly came under pressure from British and American agents and from other tribes, particularly the Wyandots in the north, who were pro-British.

Many Delaware chiefs argued that an alliance with the Americans was an opportunity to assert the tribe's independence from the Six Nations and to challenge the Six Nations' claims to lands west of the Ohio. In 1778, the United States signed its first treaty, the Treaty of Fort Pitt, with the Delaware tribe. The treaty allowed American troops to pass through Delaware territory.

In addition, the Delaware agreed to sell meat, corn, horses and other supplies to the United States and allow their men to enlist in the United States army.

After the American victory in the Revolutionary War, the Delaware struggled as the Americans continued to move into the native's territory and were later forced to surrender most of their Ohio lands with the Treaty of Greenville in 1795. In 1829, the United States forced the Delawares to relinquish their remaining land in Ohio and move west of the Mississippi River.

## **Miami Tribe**

The Miami, a tribe in the Great Lakes region, sided with the British during the Revolutionary War. After the British lost the war, the Miami tribe continued to fight the Americans who began pouring into the Ohio country. Between the years 1783 and 1790, the Miami tribe killed 1,500 settlers.

This sparked a war between the Americans and the Miami tribe, the Miami War, which is also known as Little Turtle's War, from 1790-1794. The Miami tribe were defeated, ceding most of their territory in Ohio and Indiana to the Americans. Throughout the 19th century, the Miami continued to sign more treaties and ceded more land and the tribe eventually emigrated to Kansas in 1846 and were then removed to Oklahoma in 1867.

## **Wyandot Tribe**

The Wyandot (Huron), a tribe in the Great Lakes region, sided with the British during the Revolutionary War. After the war, the Wyandot continued to fight the Americans who encroached on their land. There



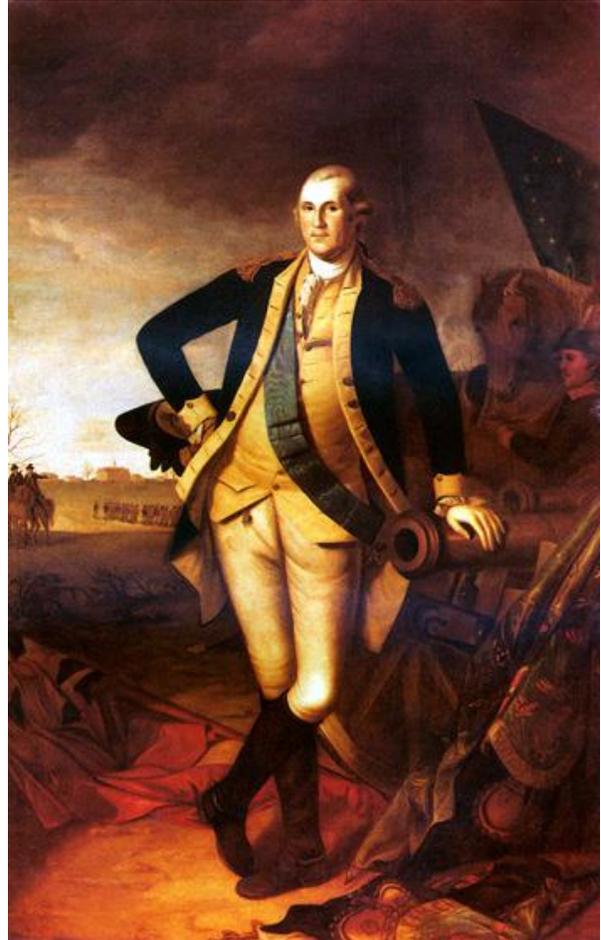
On March 6, 1779, George Washington stated in a letter to Major General Horatio Gates,

“to carry the war into the heart of the country of the six nations - to cut off their settlements, destroy their next year’s crops, and do them every other mischief of which time and circumstances will permit.”

On May 31, 1779, Washington wrote a letter to Major General John Sullivan advising him how to carry out these orders against the Iroquois Confederacy:

“The expedition you are appointed to command is to be directed against the hostile tribes of the six nations of Indians, with their associates and adherents.”

“The immediate objects are the total destruction and devastation of their settlements and the capture of as many prisoners of every age and sex as possible. It will be essential to ruin their crops now in the ground and prevent their planting more.”



Washington went on to add that if the natives indicate they want peace, they must earn it:

“After you have very thoroughly completed the destruction of their settlements; if the Indians should show a disposition for peace, I would have you to encourage it, on condition that they will give some decisive evidence of their sincerity by delivering up some of the principal instigators of their past hostility into our hands—Butler, Brandt, the most mischievous of the Tories that have joined them or any other they may have in their power that we are interested to get into ours...”

The destruction in Iroquois country was so great that many Iroquois had to flee to Canada and subsist on British charity there. The tribes that did side with the Americans, such as the Oneida, didn’t fare much better because they suffered retaliation from the pro-British tribes of the confederacy.

The decision of the Oneida to support the Americans split the Iroquois Confederacy and eventually even split the Oneida tribe itself. As the war raged on, opposing sides of the Iroquois Confederacy began to turn on each other.

On October 22, 1784, the Fort Stanwix Treaty formally brought the fighting between the Americans the Iroquois Confederacy to an end. The treaty awarded peace and government protection to the Senecas, Mohawks, Onondagas and Cayugas. The Oneida’s wartime service was formally recognized by the US Congress with the Treaty of Canandaigua, a document signed by President George Washington that affirmed the tribe’s right to oversee their affairs and lands without interference from other governments.

## **Potawami Tribe**

The Potawami, a tribe in the Great Lakes region, tried to remain neutral in the Revolutionary War but eventually sided with the Americans in 1778. The Potawami had been long-standing trading partners and military allies with the French and fought alongside them in the French and Indian War but were reluctant to get involved in another war. They were later convinced to join the American's side.

When the Americans won the war, they took the entire Midwest from the British in the Treaty of Paris in 1783. As more and more white settlers began to move into the Ohio River Valley, the Ohio Indians found themselves in a war with the US from 1790 to 1794. The war turned many Indians against the US.

The Potawatomi had ceded much of their lands to the United States by the mid-19th century and the tribe split up and relocated to various distant locations, such as Texas, Kansas, Iowa and Canada, although many stayed in Wisconsin.

## **Catawaba Tribe**

The Catawaba, a tribe with a population of a few hundred that lived in the Piedmont area along the border of South Carolina and North Carolina, sided with the Americans in 1775. The Catawaba fought in numerous key battles in South and North Carolina.

In 1780, the British invaded the South and the Catawaba villages became a temporary refuge for American troops. But the British troops eventually forced the Catawaba to flee north to Virginia when they burned their villages and confiscated their cattle and other goods.

In 1782, after General Charles Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown, the Catawaba returned home and the South Carolinians paid them for their service. The Catawbas also received a state-recognized reservation in South Carolina as a result of their support of the Americans, which they still occupy today.

## **Chickasaw Tribe**

The Chickasaw, a southern tribe with a population of 4,000 who lived in Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, Kentucky and Missouri, sided with the British during the Revolutionary War. The Chickasaw had been trading partners and staunch allies of the British throughout the 18th century and continued their support for the British in the Revolutionary War.

The Chickasaw participated in the war mostly by patrolling the Mississippi River against American attacks and engaging in battles against American Colonel George Rogers Clark in present-day Illinois. Small groups of Chickasaw warriors also helped Britain defend Mobile and Pensacola against the Spanish in 1780-81.

After the war ended, the Chickasaws lost the British as trading partners and were forced to seek trade with Spain and the United States.

## **Choctaw Tribe**

The Choctaw, a southern tribe with a population of 15,000 who inhabited about 50 villages in a key strategic position of the lower Mississippi, were coveted by both the Americans and the British during the Revolutionary War but the tribe sided with the British.

At the start of the Revolutionary War, the British hired Choctaw warriors to patrol the Mississippi River against American attacks. After Spain declared war on Britain, hundreds of Choctaw warriors helped the British defend Mobile in 1780 and Pensacola in 1780-81, even though a small faction of Choctaw warriors supported Spain. After the British lost the war, the Choctaw lost the British as trading partners and were forced to seek trade with Spain and the United States.

### **Creek Tribe**

The Creek, a southern tribe with a population of 15,000 that lived in Georgia, Alabama, Florida, and North Carolina, never officially joined the war effort, preferring instead to engage in cautious participation.

Factionalism within the tribe was a major factor in preventing the tribe from unifying and joining the war effort. Creek towns were divided among the Lower Towns and Upper Towns, with each town asserting its own foreign policies. Access to European manufactured goods were the Creek's biggest concern and the war put trade relations in jeopardy.

Yet, the war also provided Creek men with the ability to acquire trade goods by providing military services, especially in the Mobile and Pensacola campaigns between Britain and Spain in 1780-81. Still other Creeks used the war to strengthen their political positions by taking leadership roles in diplomacy. Nevertheless, the Creek tribe never engaged in significant sustained fighting during the war.

### **Cherokee Tribe**

The Cherokee, a southern tribe with a population of about 8,500 who lived in the interior hill country of the Carolinas and Georgia, sided with the British during the Revolutionary War.



In the spring of 1776, young warriors, led by Cherokee Chief Dragging Canoe, launched attacks on the American frontier in the Carolinas and Georgia in retaliation for illegal encroachments on their lands, according to an article on the Encyclopedia of Alabama website:

“The willingness of Dragging Canoe and other warriors to take the fight to white settlers stemmed in part from a generational split among the Cherokees: young warriors increasingly distrusted their elders’ abilities to prevent further land loss.”

In response, the colonial governments of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia organized retaliatory expeditions against the Cherokees. After initial successes in their attacks, the Cherokees soon witnessed four American armies from Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia invade nearly all their villages during the summer and fall of 1776.

Cherokee chiefs sued for peace in spring 1777 and agreed to still more land cessions, while Dragging Canoe and hundreds of other Cherokees moved south and west to establish new villages on Chickamauga Creek. There they became known as the Chickamauga Cherokees and continued to resist the Americans.

### **Declaration of Independence and Native Americans**

In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson clearly described the role of American Indians in the American Revolution. In addition to his other oppressive acts, King George III had,

“endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.”

Inscribed in the founding document of the United States, Jefferson’s words placed Indians on the wrong side of the struggle for liberty and the wrong side of history from the very beginning of the Revolution. Thus while Americans fought for their rights and freedoms, Jefferson argued that Native Americans fought against them, the vicious pawns of a tyrannical king.

### **Subsequent Indian Relocation (Trail of Tears)**

Then, during the 1830s, there was a forced relocation of Eastern Woodlands Indians of the Southeast region of the United States (including Cherokee, Creek, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Seminole, among other nations) to Indian Territory west of the Mississippi River – on the Trail of Tears.

Estimates based on tribal and military records suggest that approximately 100,000 indigenous people were forced from their homes during that period, which is sometimes known as the removal era, and that some 15,000 died during the journey west.

The term Trail of Tears reminds us of the collective suffering those people experienced, although it is most commonly used in reference to the removal experiences of the Southeast Indians generally and the Cherokee nation specifically.

The physical trail consisted of several overland routes and one main water route and, by passage of the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act in 2009, stretched some 5,045 miles across portions of nine states (Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Tennessee).



Information here is primarily from the US State Department; Britannica; Ohio History Central; Michigan State University; National Park Service; Native Peoples in the Revolutionary War, Jane Merritt; History of Massachusetts, Rebecca Beatrice Brooks; Encyclopedia of Alabama; Britannica; American Battlefield Trust

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the American Revolution, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young