

Connecting with U.S. History

Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Policy

When Andrew Jackson became president in 1829, about 125,000 Native Americans still lived east of the Mississippi River. Earlier U.S. policy toward the Indians had focused on encouraging them to adopt the lifestyle of white Americans. They had been told they could stay in their homelands if they lived peacefully. In fact, the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Creek became known as the "Civilized Tribes" because they adapted so well to life among the white settlers.

Unfortunately, they lived on rich farmland in the South. Settlers continued to want more of that fertile land, and conflict developed. Earlier agreements with the tribes were ignored when Congress passed the Indian Removal Act in 1830.

President Jackson's message to Congress on December 8, 1830, explains his support of this policy:

The consequences of a speedy removal will be important to the United States, to individual States, and to the Indians themselves. The pecuniary advantages which it Promises to the Government are the least of its recommendations. It puts an end to all possible danger of collision between the authorities of the General and State Governments on account of the Indians. It will place a dense and civilized population in large tracts of country now occupied by a few savage hunters. By opening the whole territory between



Tennessee on the north and Louisiana on the south to the settlement of the whites it will incalculably strengthen the southwestern frontier and render the adjacent States strong enough to repel future invasions without remote aid.

The result of the Indian Removal Act was the forced westward migration of the tribes. The harsh experience of the forced march under the control of the U.S. Army became known as the "Trail of Tears."

The Choctaw removal took place in 1831. Pressure on the Cherokee increased when gold was discovered on their land in Georgia. More than 15,000 Cherokee were forced to follow the Trail of Tears to what is now Oklahoma; at least 4,000 died along the way.

In 1836, President Jackson's last message to Congress included this statement about the Indian Removal Act: "The national policy, founded alike in interest and in humanity, so long and so steadily pursued by this government for the removal of the Indian tribes . . . [ended] by the conclusion of the treaty with the Cherokees."

Jackson continued by asking Congress to direct their attention to the importance of providing a well-digested and comprehensive system for the protection, supervision, and improvement of the various tribes now planted in the Indian country.