

Junaluska ^[1]

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by Gordon B. McKinney

1779[?]-20 Nov. 1858

Junaluska, Cherokee ^[2] warrior and hero of Andrew Jackson ^[3]'s victory over the Creeks ^[4] at Horseshoe Bend ^[5] in 1814, was born near the head of the Little Tennessee River in either Macon County ^[6], N.C., or Rabun County ^[7], Ga. Although the date of his birth is uncertain, he signed four federal affidavits in 1849 indicating his age as "about seventy" and he was listed as seventy-two in the 1851 Cherokee census. The names of his parents are not known.

"Junaluska" is a corruption of the warrior's second Cherokee ^[2] name. According to folk tradition, when he was born, his parents had great difficulty in finding an appropriate name for him. One day when his carrying frame was placed against a tree while his parents worked, the frame fell over. He was then named Gul-ka-la-ski or "one falling from a leaning position." He was so-called until 1814. In that year he vowed to exterminate every Creek ^[4] in battle, but, despite an overwhelming victory, did not achieve his goal. As a result, he called himself Tsu-na-la-hun-ski or "one who tries, but fails." Over the last four decades of his life, the name was gradually Anglicized into its present form.

Virtually nothing is known of Junaluska's life until 1811. During that year, the Shawnee chief Tecumseh ^[8] visited the Cherokees ^[2] at Soco Gap and urged them to join his war against the advancing American settlers. Junaluska spoke for the Cherokees ^[2]—despite this instance of leadership, he never held the title of chief—and rejected Tecumseh ^[8]'s overtures. Junaluska also spoke for the tribal leadership when he extolled the advantages of the settled agricultural life-style adopted by the Cherokees ^[2].

In November 1813, he recruited one hundred Cherokees ^[2] in western North Carolina who joined an army of five hundred braves already enrolled in Georgia, Tennessee, and Alabama to fight with Andrew Jackson ^[3] against the Creeks ^[4]. During his four months of service with this force, Junaluska performed feats that would make him a legendary figure in his lifetime. One account credits him with stopping a Creek ^[4] prisoner from killing Jackson ^[3], although there is no documentation to support this story. There is much better evidence that Junaluska may have played a significant role in the battle between Jackson ^[3]'s force and the Creeks ^[4] at Horseshoe Bend ^[5], Ala. When white militia stormed the fortified Creek ^[4] position on 27 Mar. 1814, Junaluska and other Cherokees ^[2] swam across the Tennessee River and secured the Creek ^[4] canoes. Then they ferried the Cherokee ^[2] force across the river and into a position at the rear of the Creeks ^[4]. The outflanked Creeks ^[4] continued to fight fiercely but were eventually overwhelmed by Jackson ^[3]'s army. Junaluska was recognized for his bravery—he was wounded in the shoulder—and his daring. The Cherokees ^[2], in particular, believed that his actions were responsible for the victory.

Junaluska returned to North Carolina and continued as a farmer. Little is known of this period in his life except that he appears to have been moderately successful. Under the provisions of the Treaty of 1819 ^[9], he claimed 640 acres of land in Deep Gap ^[10]. Later claims in 1843 asked for compensation for two farms of more than 300 acres each at Yularka and Cheoah. In 1838 Junaluska was forced by Federal troops to leave North Carolina and join most of the other Cherokees ^[2] in the removal to Oklahoma. Traditional accounts maintain that during the forced move Junaluska's wife and children died due to the difficulty of the trip. The same accounts assert that Junaluska expressed deep resentment about Andrew Jackson ^[3]'s support for the removal process.

Upset by the loss of his family and longing for his native homeland, Junaluska walked the entire distance from Oklahoma to North Carolina in 1843. Having no legal status in the state, he was forced to live a precarious existence for the next three years. In 1847, a special act of the North Carolina legislature accorded him citizenship and a grant of 337 acres in recognition of his actions in aiding Jackson's army at Horseshoe Bend ^[5]. This land was located at Cheoah and was apparently part of his holdings before he was forced to leave the state. One provision of the grant would embroil Junaluska and his heirs in controversy for two decades. The legislature had required that Junaluska not sell the land, but in 1850 he sold the grant to George W. Hayes for \$1,000. Junaluska later left the same property to be used to support his wife. The controversy was not settled until 1872, when George Smythe, a northern businessman, acquired the land. The present town of Robbinsville ^[11] occupies part of the grant.

Junaluska died at age seventy-nine. According to traditional accounts, he collapsed while walking to the healing springs of Citico ^[12], Tenn. In 1910, the General Joseph Winston Chapter ^[13] of the Daughters of the American Revolution ^[14] in Graham County ^[15] erected a monument over Junaluska's grave on a wooded hill in Robbinsville ^[11].

He was married at least three times. One wife died before 1829, and there are no records of any children. Another wife and at least two sons accompanied him on the journey to Oklahoma during the 1838 removal, and they apparently died during the ordeal. On his return to North Carolina in 1843, he married Nicie (or Nisuh) and they had three children: Jimmy, Nalih, and Secqueyuh.

References:

Documents covering Junaluska's life (Graham County Courthouse; Federal Courthouse, Asheville)

William Holland Thomas Papers and microfilm records of Cherokee materials [National Archives](#) ^[16], Washington, D.C.; [Museum of the Cherokee Historical Society](#) ^[17], Cherokee, N.C.).

The only reasonably accurate account of his life is found in H. C. Wilburn, *Junaluska: The Man—The Name—The Places* ^[18] (1951).

The one surviving photograph is published in Ora Blackmun, *Western North Carolina: Its Mountains and Its People to 1880* ^[19] (1977).

Image Credit:

"Old Photo of (Chief) Junaluska." Copy made by Albert Barden. From the Albert Barden Collection, courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina.

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[Cherokee Indians](#) ^[2]

[Indian removal](#) ^[22]

[War](#) ^[23]

Authors:

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Origin - location:

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1 January 1988 | McKinney, Gordon B.

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