

Sequoyah ^[1]



Sequoyahcliff1066

^[2]

by Stanley J. Folmsbee; Revised by SLNC Government and Heritage Library, September 2023

1770?-August 1843

Sequoyah was a Cherokee trader, silversmith, blacksmith, and inventor of *Cherokee syllabary* ^[3]. He was born in the Cherokee town of Taskigi, Tenn., then western North Carolina. His mother was Wurteh Watts and was likely Cherokee nobility of the Red Paint clan. Sequoyah's father is not properly known, but several men are likely his father: *Nathaniel Gist* ^[4], a colonel in the Continental Army; Nathaniel Guyst/Guist/Gist, a fur trader from Virginia, or George Gist, a guest of the Cherokee tribe around the time of Sequoyah's birth. In all scenarios, Sequoyah's father was not present when he was born.

Sequoyah was raised by his mother in traditional Cherokee custom--he did not learn English or dress in white apparel, and spoke only Cherokee. Sequoyah also engaged in hunting and fur trading until an accident left him with a physical disability.

In 1815, Sequoyah married *Sally Waters* ^[5] of the Cherokee Bird Clan.

Increased contacts with white people led him to ponder over their "talking leaves" (written language), and he resolved to use it to the benefit of the Cherokee tribe. By 1821, he had completed a table of eighty-five or eighty-six syllables in the Cherokee language. A council of chiefs approved his work, and thousands of Indians learned to read and write. In 1822 he visited the western *Cherokee* ^[6], gave them his syllabary, and made his home with them. His invention stimulated the printing of books and a newspaper, *Cherokee Phoenix* ^[7], in the Cherokee language. Sequoyah was active in the political life of the tribe and in 1828 visited Washington, D.C., as an envoy. In 1841 the Cherokee National Council voted him an allowance and two years later an annuity of \$300, which was continued to his widow. Early in 1843 he began a journey in search of a band of *Cherokee* ^[6] said to have moved to the region west of the Mississippi, and he died in *Mexico* ^[8] in the fall of that year. According to one account, he had five wives and twenty or more children. His is commemorated by a California redwood tree called Sequoyah and a statue in Washington, D.C.

References:

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