

## A TRIBUTE TO SEQUOYAH

**“My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge” (Hos. 4:6)**

One of America’s most famous educators was born in the 1770’s in the village of Tuskegee on the Tennessee River. His mother was a Cherokee Indian named Wut-teh, from the Paint Clan. His father was thought to be a German fur trader named Nathaniel Gist. The child was called “Sikwoyi” (Sequoyah) which means “pig’s foot”. He was lame in one leg, apparently from birth.

When the whites encroached on their land Sequoyah moved to Georgia and learned to work with silver. Charles Hicks, a wealthy farmer in the area who wrote English, wrote “Sequoyah “ on a piece of paper and suggested that he sign his works like the white silversmiths did. Charles Hicks was the first convert to Christ among the Cherokees.

In 1809 Sequoyah became obsessed with developing an alphabet for his people. His efforts made him an object of ridicule. Since he had no access to pen and paper, he made his marks upon pieces of bark with a knife or a nail. His wife once burned his barks and his neighbours accused him of necromancy. Undeterred, the Cherokee genius repeated the sounds of his own language over and over until he had identified 86 sounds which he could represent by marks on a page. The labour of love took twelve long years.

In 1821 he submitted his Cherokee syllabary to a public test for the leading men of the nation. It is said that Sequoyah and one of his sons were placed a some distance from each other. Sentences were dictated and the writings were carried back and forth by trusted messengers. Gradually the Cherokees came to accept Sequoyah’s invention as a valuable tool for education. The simplicity of his system made it possible to learn to read in only a few days and it was said that within only a few months virtually the whole nation became literate.

In 1824 a young native convert in the Moravian mission named Atsi, made a translation of a portion of St. John’s Gospel which was copied hundreds of times and widely distributed throughout the nation. In 1825, David Brown, a Cherokee preacher, completed a translation of the entire New Testament Scriptures.

In 1827 Sequoyah, and other leaders of the tribe, went to Washington and signed a treaty. He was promised \$500 in recognition of the benefits he conferred upon the tribe by the invention of their alphabet, and the tribe was promised \$1,000 to set up a printing press. Six years later Sequoyah had received only \$389.75. Sequoyah referred to writing as “talking leaves”. This was apparently a use of biting satire as he felt that the white man’s words dried up and blew away like leaves when the treaties no longer served his purpose.

Also in 1827 the Cherokee council appropriated funding for the establishment of a national newspaper. Early the next year a hand press and Cherokee characters were shipped from Boston to New Echota, the capital of the Cherokee Nation. The first issue appeared Feb. 21, 1828 and was called “Tsa la gi Tsu lehisnunhi” or the “Cherokee Phoenix”. This project was financed by the Cherokees themselves as none of the promised funds came from the government. This was the first Indian newspaper to be published in the United States.

After being forced from Tennessee to Georgia and then to Arkansas, the Cherokees were forced to move again. This time it was to Oklahoma, or “Indian Territory”. Sequoyah wound up with 10 acres of cleared land and three small cabins. A visiting merchant said that he had 2 mules, 3 yoke oxen, a wagon, and a small stock of cattle and hogs. It was said that during his life he had 5 wives and 20 children. The merchant told him that he thought he had done a more valuable service to his people than if he had given each of them a bag of gold. Sequoyah responded that Governor Houston had told him that it was worth more than a double handful of gold to each man in the nation.

Though advanced in years and in failing health, Sequoyah started out in 1842 for Mexico. He had heard of an isolated band of Cherokees who lived there and apparently wanted them to be literate. He made it there, but never made it home. He is thought to have died in San Fernando Mexico and his grave has never been found. May God richly bless the memory of Sequoyah, who did what he could to keep his people from perishing for the lack of knowledge.