

27th January 2010 **How Many Cherokees Died on the Trail of Tears?**



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How many Cherokees died on the Trail of Tears? It's a straightforward question that gets asked a lot, but unfortunately there is no straightforward answer.

The most commonly quoted number is 4,000. Missionary Elizur Butler, who was a participant, suggested that number as early as 1839. (Wilkins, 1983, p. 315). Anthropologist James Mooney, one of the most respected and renowned Cherokee scholars of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, agreed that altogether "it is asserted, probably with reason, that over 4,000 Cherokee died as a direct result of the removal." (Mooney, 1900, p. 127.)

Demographer Russell Thornton points out that this number "seems highly speculative," however (Anderson, 1991, p. 85.) "It appears to be only a suggested estimate, one without a hard factual basis, but one that subsequent scholars have cited and recited."

Anyone who has taken the Cherokee Nation history course taught for years by Julia Coates knows that the numbers are controversial, even among tribal members.

"It was almost certainly not 4,000," Coates said during a Cherokee Nation history course she taught in Rome, Georgia.

She said that when you add up all the deaths noted by the various Cherokee-led detachments, you get 447 recorded deaths. About 500 died in the camps before the journey began, Coates said, "not 2,000, as has been asserted." If you also count those who died soon after arriving in the West, along with those who died earlier in the June, 1838 military-led detachments, you arrive at a number somewhere between 1,600 and 2,000, she said.

"That's still an eighth of the entire Cherokee population," said Coates.

"But there's almost a gut-level reaction. You want to hold onto that number of 4,000," she said. "Intuitively, you fear that people might say, 'Well, that's not that bad.' You think that the 4,000 number makes it seem more tragic, more horrific."

But even the lower number has power, she said, when you realize that it consists mostly of small children and the elderly.

"Those under 10 years old were just lost," she said. "How strange would it feel if we lived in a society there were no children and no old people?"

Many Cherokees lost all or most of their children in a span of just a few months,

she said.

"It's unimaginable," said Coates.

Add to that Thornton's assertion that "over 10,000 additional Cherokees would have been alive sometime during the period 1835 to 1840 had Cherokee removal not occurred," (Anderson, 1991, p. 93), and one can plainly see that numbers often obscure as much as they reveal. Simple questions often do not have simple answers.

Was the tragedy any less for those who suffered on the Trail of Tears because probably only half as many died as has been commonly asserted? I will let the testimony of an eyewitness give the answer:

...Just as we were preparing to sit down to supper, br. Reece called me to the gate, saying there is a woman with a dead child. I went and lo! Sure enough, there stood a dear weeping mother with the lifeless body of a beloved infant about 12 months old. Her father a very aged Cherokee was with her ... The child, it is said, had the measles ... The dear little girl was wrapped close in a blanket. It was taken to the house, grave clothes were prepared, a coffin made, and a grave dug, so that it was buried just before dark. This seemed necessary as the corpse had been carried so far in the hot sun.

...O what a summer it has been. Groaning has been my repast. Yet O how kind has our Dearest Redeemer been. Blessed be his Holy Name forever and ever.

--From the *Journal of Rev. Daniel S. Butrick* (pp. 32-33.)

NOTES

William L. Anderson, *Cherokee Removal: Before and After*. Athens, GA: 1991, University of Georgia Press

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Notes from the Cherokee Nation History Course

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LindaB [January 28, 2010 at 8:40 PM](#)

This is great Jeff - well-written!

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W. Jeff Bishop  [January 28, 2010 at 9:11 PM](#)

Thanks, Linda!

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Anonymous [March 15, 2015 at 9:33 PM](#)

I was told my grandmother was born during the Trail of Tears, and soon after my Great Grandmother died. I cant seem to find any documents, records etc. Where should I start?

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