

# Sequoya

c. 1760–1843



**WHY HE MADE HISTORY** Sequoya developed a written syllabary for the Cherokee language. This achievement helped the Cherokee people become a powerful force at a time when the rights of American Indians were being ignored.



*As you read the biography below, think about how Sequoya's sense of responsibility led him to develop a written Cherokee language.*

Did you know that many American Indian languages were only spoken languages? The Cherokee language was one such language. A man named Sequoya changed this for his fellow Cherokee.

Known as Sogwali to the Cherokee and George Guess to most Americans of his time, he was given the name Sequoya by missionaries. Sequoya was born in Tennessee but came to live in the Cherokee country in Georgia. He worked as a trader and also as a blacksmith and silversmith. In his work as a trader, Sequoya had many meetings with white Americans. He was curious about their way of communicating through writing. Although many Cherokee believed the writing to be a form of witchcraft, Sequoya saw the benefits of a written language.

Sequoya's first attempt at creating a written language was to invent a symbol for each spoken word. Sequoya soon realized this would create too many symbols. He began studying the sounds of the spoken Cherokee language. After a long time, he came up with 86 different syllables, or sound units, and created symbols for each syllable.



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## VOCABULARY

**syllabary** a set of characters, each one representing a syllable

Sequoya's daughter became the first to read and write with the **syllabary**. A group of Cherokee warriors believed Sequoya and his daughter were dealing with a form of witchcraft. They were put on trial. After proving that the symbols represented the Cherokee language, Sequoya was asked to teach the symbols to the warriors. The warriors learned the written language within a week. The gift of literacy soon spread throughout the Cherokee Nation. Before long, newspapers were published in the Cherokee language.

Sequoya was moved west to Oklahoma with other Cherokee by the U.S. government. He continued teaching thousands of Cherokee to read and write. Having a written language helped unite the Cherokee people throughout the country and made them leaders among other Native Americans.

Sequoya died around 1843 but will always be remembered for his contributions to the Cherokee Nation. The large sequoia trees of the western United States are named in his honor.

### WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

- 1. Draw Conclusions** Why might the Cherokee warriors have thought the symbols created by Sequoya were witchcraft?

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- 2. Expressing and Supporting a Point of View** What do you think was the most important outcome of the Cherokee having a written language? Provide reasons or examples to support your point of view.

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### ACTIVITY

Find a copy of the Cherokee syllabary. Work with a partner to sound out the symbols. Do research to find Cherokee words that Sequoya may have used in trading.