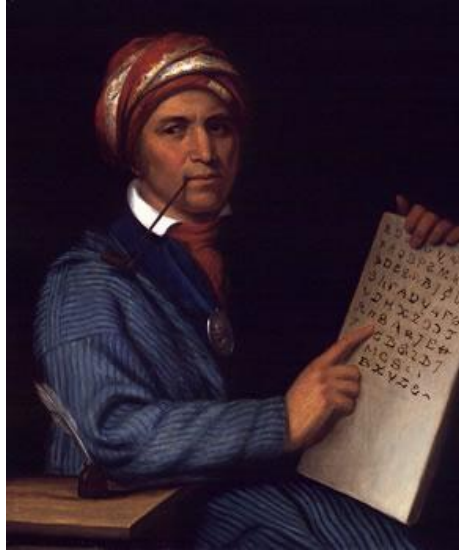


Sequoyah



Courtesy of the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery.

Born the son of a Cherokee mother, Wurteh,¹ and a soldier from Virginia, Nathaniel Gist (or Guess), in Tuskegee, Tennessee (near Fort Loudoun) in 1771, Sequoyah² became internationally famous for being the inventor of the Cherokee syllabary. He was brought up in Cherokee customs, and was not able to speak, read, or write English. He married a Cherokee woman and was a silversmith by trade.

During the War of 1812, he and several other Cherokees enlisted under General Andrew Jackson to fight against the British and Creek Indians. He had been fascinated with the English “talking leaves” for years, and during the war, he realized the importance for a writing system for keeping records, writing letters home, and reading the military orders. Shortly after the war, he began to develop one on his own.

Over the course of a decade, Sequoyah reduced the Cherokee language to eighty-six sounds, each represented by a different symbol. Unlike English, where certain letters occasionally sound the same, Sequoyah’s system allowed for anyone who knew the sounds of the symbols to be able to read or write. Historians maintain that Sequoyah is the only known person in human history to have invented a written communication without being literate in another language.

He taught his daughter, Ayoka, the symbols, and together they introduced it to the Cherokee people. It was his demonstration with Ayoka that convinced leaders to adopt the syllabary officially. Within a very short period of time, thousands of Cherokees became literate, exceeding the literacy rates of those learning English.

Soon after, Samuel Austin Worcester, a Congregational Church missionary to the Cherokees became convinced that the best way to introduce the Church’s message was through the Cherokee language. He was able to provide the Cherokee with a printing press that used the syllabary, and soon after came the Bible in the Cherokee language. By 1828, the first Native American newspaper, the *Cherokee Phoenix*, was printed in Cherokee and English. More printed documents came to follow, including hymn books,

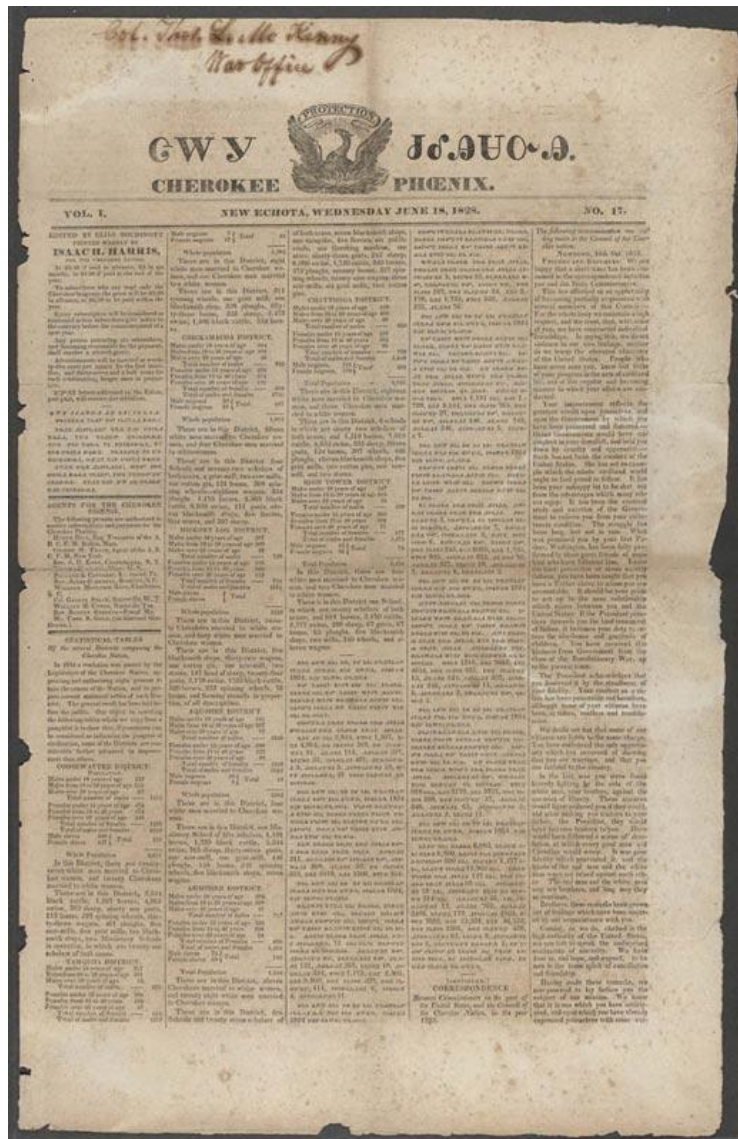
¹ Sometimes spelled Wureth, Wut-teh, or Wurtah.

² Also known as George Gist or Guess.

government documents, and others. When Sequoyah passed away in 1843, over four million pages had been printed in the Cherokee language.

Sequoyah was given a lifetime literary pension from the Cherokee nation for his work, as well as a specially-created silver medal. He passed away while in Mexico, while attempting to bring back a group of Cherokees who were being persecuted against.

The name Sequoyah has been attached to many places and things in his honor, including a TVA power plant, an Oklahoman county seat, and the tall Californian redwood trees (named in his honor by German botanist Stephan Endlicher). He is also honored with a statue in the National Statuary Hall at the U.S. Capitol to represent the state of Oklahoma. His was the first statute dedicated to a Native American in the Hall.



Cherokee Phoenix, New Echota, Georgia, June 18, 1828. Newspaper. Serial and Government Publications Division, Library of Congress.



Highsmith, Carol M., photographer. "Statue of the Cherokee leader Sequoyah, Cherokee, North Carolina." Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Highsmith (Carol M.) Archive collection. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2011632384/>.



Statue of Sequoyah in the Hall of Fame at the U.S. Capitol. Courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol.