

## This Day in History... February 21, 1828

### First Native American Newspaper

On February 21, 1828, the first Native American newspaper, utilizing Sequoyah's Cherokee Syllabary, was printed.

Sequoyah was born around 1770 into a family respected for its knowledge of Cherokee tribal traditions. Accounts of Sequoyah's early life vary, but it is known that by 1809, he was a silversmith in present-day Alabama.

Around 1809, Sequoyah became interested in creating a system of writing for the Cherokee language. At first he tried to create a character for each word, but he eventually developed a system of symbols to represent each syllable. Basing some of his work on the Roman, and possibly Cyrillic, alphabets, Sequoyah developed a written language of 86 characters. Because each symbol represents a whole syllable, or mora, as opposed to individual speech sounds, or phonemes, Sequoyah's system is classified as a syllabary instead of an alphabet. In 1821, after twelve years of work, Sequoyah completed his writing system. He hoped the syllabary would allow the Cherokee to remain independent of whites, and wanted to record ancient traditions in a permanent form.



*From the Great Americans Series*



*This stamp was issued to commemorate the arrival of the Five Civilized Tribes in Oklahoma.*

Initially, many doubted its value, so Sequoyah taught the symbols to his daughter Ah-yo-ka. While many of the locals were impressed with his writing system, the medicine men he showed it to believed he was possessed by evil spirits. Despite the negative reaction of the medicine men, Sequoyah showed his syllabary to a group of Chickamauga warriors, who were impressed by it. Soon after, schools were being filled with Cherokees wanting to learn the new writing language. By 1823, the syllabary was in widespread use among the Cherokees, and in 1825, it was made the official written language of

the Cherokee Nation.

Around this time, the Cherokee Nation was under frequent pressure from the nearby states to abandon their claim to their land, or move to a territory west of the Mississippi River. The Cherokee General Council believed that their people needed to be informed of the situation and remain united. So they had a special printing press made using Sequoyah's Cherokee syllabary. The press would be used to produce the first Native American newspaper in the US.

The newspaper, the *Cherokee Phoenix*, was first published on February 21, 1828, and featured articles in both English and Cherokee. Printed once a week, the *Phoenix* presented official laws and documents of the Cherokee nation as well as local and national news. It also had articles about the Cherokee progress in the "arts of civilized life," stories about temperance and Christian living, as well as short fictional stories.

In 1829, the paper was renamed the *Cherokee Phoenix and Indians' Advocate*, to reflect the increased focus on the ongoing removal crisis. In 1835, a Georgia militia unit confiscated the printing press to stop them from printing anti-removal materials. Later that year the Treaty of New Echota was signed (though it did not have the support of the Cherokee National Council or a large majority of the Cherokee population), and the Cherokee were forcibly removed from lands east of the Mississippi River.

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