

# Sequoyah

## Sequoyah



SE-QUO-YAH – a lithograph from History of the Indian Tribes of North America. This lithograph is from the portrait painted by Charles Bird King in 1828.

<b>Native name</b>	ᎆᎩᎦᎵᎠ
<b>Born</b>	c. 1770 Taskigi, Cherokee Nation (near present day, Knoxville, Tennessee) <sup>[1]</sup>
<b>Died</b>	c. 1843 Tamaulipas, Mexico
<b>Nationality</b>	Cherokee
<b>Other names</b>	George Guess or Gist
<b>Occupation</b>	silversmith, blacksmith, teacher, soldier
<b>Spouse</b>	1st: Sally (maiden name unknown), 2nd: <i>U-ti-yu</i>
<b>Children</b>	Four with first wife, three with second
<b>Parents</b>	<i>Wut-teh</i> and Nathaniel Gist

**Sequoyah** (ᎆᎩᎦᎵᎠ *Ssequoyya*, as he signed his name,<sup>[2][3]</sup> or ᎆᎩᎦᎵᎠ *Se-quo-ya*, as his name is often spelled today in Cherokee) (c. 1770–1843), named in English **George Gist** or **George Guess**, was a Cherokee silversmith. In 1821 he completed his independent creation of a Cherokee syllabary, making reading and writing in Cherokee possible. This was the only time in recorded history that a member of a non-literate people independently created an effective writing system.<sup>[1][4]</sup> After seeing its worth, the people of the Cherokee Nation rapidly began to use his syllabary and officially adopted it in 1825. Their literacy rate quickly surpassed that of surrounding European-American settlers.<sup>[1]</sup>

## Early life

Sequoyah's heroic status has led to several competing accounts of his life that are speculative, contradictory, or fabricated.<sup>[5]</sup>

James Mooney, a prominent anthropologist and historian of the Cherokee people, quoted a cousin as saying that as a little boy, Sequoyah spent his early years with his mother in the village of Tuskegee. Estimates of his birth year ranged from 1760 to 1776. His name is believed to come from the Cherokee word *siqua* meaning 'hog'. This is a reference either to a childhood deformity or to a later injury that left Sequoyah disabled.<sup>[6]</sup>

His mother, *Wut-teh*, was known to be Cherokee, belonging to the Red Paint Clan. Mooney stated that she was the niece of a Cherokee chief. McKinney and Hall noted that she was a niece of chiefs who have been identified as the brothers Old Tassel and Doublehead. Since John Watts (also known as Young Tassel) was a nephew of the two chiefs, it is likely that *Wut-teh* and John Watts were siblings.

Sources differ as to the identity of Sequoyah's father. Mooney and others suggested that he was possibly a fur trader, who would have been a man of some social status and financial backing.<sup>[7]</sup> Grant Foreman identified him as Nathaniel Gist, who later became a commissioned officer with the Continental Army associated with George Washington.<sup>[8]</sup> Josiah C. Nott claimed he was the "son of a Scotchman".<sup>[9]</sup> In one Cherokee source, his father is said to be a half-blood and his grandfather a white man.<sup>[10]</sup>

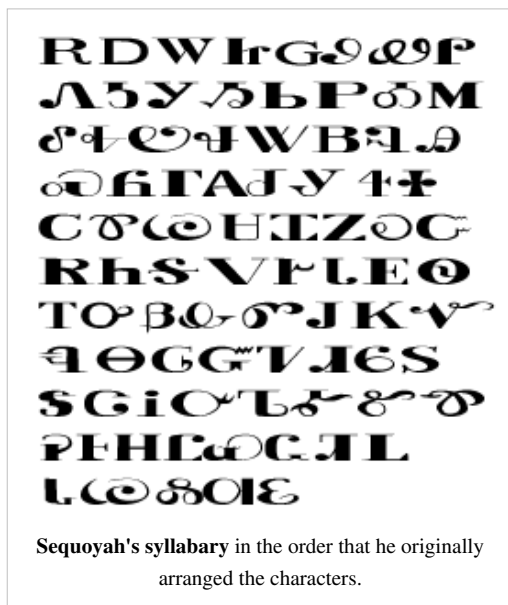
### Marriage and family

Sequoyah first married Sally Waters, with whom he had four children. Another wife was *Utiyu*, with whom he had three children. He may have also had three other wives, since polygamy was common among the Cherokee. At some point before 1809, Sequoyah moved to Willstown, in present-day northeast Alabama. There he established his trade as a silversmith.<sup>[11]</sup>

### Career

In 1813 George Guess (Sequoyah) served as one of the warriors of the Cherokee Regiment (Col. Gideon Morgan, Commander) at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend against the "Red Sticks" (Creek, or Muskogee, renegades).

### Creation of the syllabary



As a silversmith, Sequoyah dealt regularly with whites who had settled in the area. The Cherokee were impressed by their writing, referring to their correspondence as "talking leaves." Around 1809,<sup>[1]</sup> Sequoyah began work to create a system of writing for the Cherokee language. At first he sought to create a character for each word in the language. He spent a year on this effort, leaving his fields unplanted, so that his friends and neighbors thought he had lost his mind.<sup>[10][12]</sup> His wife is said to have burned his initial work, believing it to be witchcraft.<sup>[1]</sup>

Sequoyah did not succeed until he gave up trying to represent entire words and developed a symbol for each syllable in the language. After approximately a month, he had a system of 86 characters, some of which were Latin letters which he obtained from a spelling book.<sup>[10]</sup> "In their present form, many of the syllabary characters resemble Roman, Cyrillic or Greek letters or Arabic numerals," says Janine Scancarelli, a scholar of Cherokee writing, "but there is no apparent relationship between their sounds in other languages and in Cherokee."<sup>[1]</sup>

Unable to find adults willing to learn the syllabary, he taught it to his daughter, *Ayokeh* (also spelled Ayoka).<sup>[1]</sup> He traveled to the Indian Reserves in the Arkansaw Territory where some Cherokee had settled. When he tried to convince the local leaders of the syllabary's usefulness, they doubted him, believing that the symbols were merely *ad hoc* reminders. Sequoyah asked each to say a word, which he wrote down, and then called his daughter in to read the words back. This demonstration convinced the leaders to let him teach the syllabary to a few more people. This took several months, during which it was rumored that he might be using the students for sorcery. After completing the lessons, Sequoyah wrote a dictated letter to each student, and read a dictated response. This test convinced the western Cherokee that he had created a practical writing system.<sup>[12]</sup>

When Sequoyah returned east, he brought a sealed envelope containing a written speech from one of the Arkansas Cherokee leaders. By reading this speech, he convinced the eastern Cherokee also to learn the system, after which it spread rapidly.<sup>[10][12]</sup> In 1825 the Cherokee Nation officially adopted the writing system. From 1828 to 1834,

American missionaries assisted the Cherokee in using Sequoyah's syllabary to develop type characters and print the *Cherokee Phoenix*, the first newspaper of the Cherokee Nation, with text in both Cherokee and English.<sup>[4]</sup>

## Life in Arkansas and farther west

After the Nation accepted his syllabary in 1825, Sequoyah walked to the Cherokee lands in the Arkansas Territory. There he set up a blacksmith shop and a salt works. He continued to teach the syllabary to anyone who wished. In 1828, Sequoyah journeyed to Washington, D.C., as part of a delegation to negotiate a treaty for land in the planned Indian Territory.

During his trip, he met representatives of other Native American tribes. Inspired by these meetings, he decided to create a syllabary for universal use among Native American tribes. Sequoyah began to journey into areas of present-day Arizona and New Mexico, to meet with tribes there.

In addition, Sequoyah dreamed of seeing the splintered Cherokee Nation reunited. Sometime between 1843 and 1845, he died during a trip to Mexico, when he was seeking Cherokee who had moved there at the time of Indian Removal. His burial location is believed to be at the border of Mexico and Texas.

In 1938, the Cherokee Nation Principal Chief J. B. Milam funded an expedition to find Sequoyah's grave in Mexico.<sup>[13]</sup> A party of Cherokee and non-Cherokee scholars embarked from Eagle Pass, Texas, on January 1939. They found a grave site near a fresh water spring in Coahuila, Mexico, but could not conclusively determine the grave site was that of Sequoyah.<sup>[14]</sup>

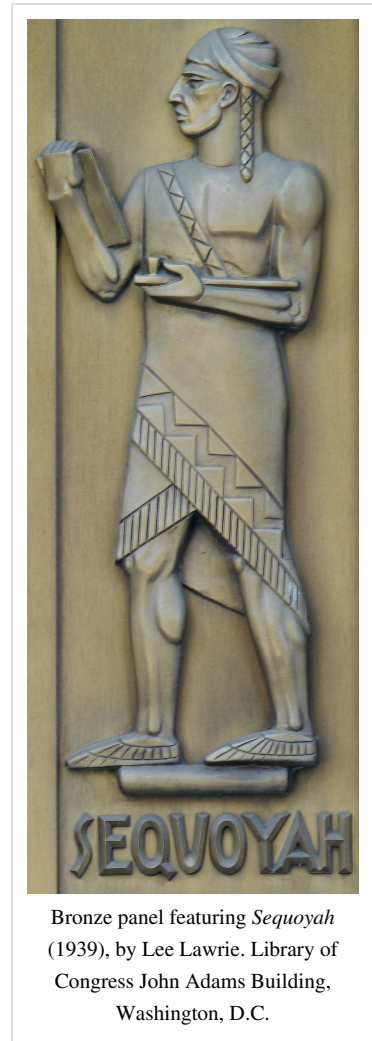
In 2003, the Cherokee Nation of Mexico received a Congressional Record acknowledging the possible discovery of Sequoyah's burial site in Coahuila, Mexico, where pilgrimages were held for several years, in honor of his legacy.

## Legacy and honors

- Sequoyah's Cabin, where he lived during 1829–1844 in Oklahoma, was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1965.
- 1939, a bronze panel with a raised figure of *Sequoyah*, by Lee Lawrie, was erected in his honor at the Library of Congress.
- Addressing the exalted place Sequoyah holds in Cherokee imagination, the ethnographer Jack Kilpatrick wrote: "Sequoyah was always in the wilderness. He walked about, but he was not a hunter. I wonder what he was looking for."<sup>[14]</sup>
- The Sequoyah Birthplace Museum in Eastern Tennessee features his life and Cherokee culture.<sup>[15]</sup>
- The United States Postal Service issued a 19¢ stamp in his honor in the Great Americans series.
- The Sequoia trees were named after him.

## Namesake honors

- The name of the district where Sequoyah lived in Oklahoma was changed to the Sequoyah District in 1851. When Oklahoma was admitted to the union, that area became known as Sequoyah County.
- The Sequoia tree, named shortly after his death, is thought to be named for him.<sup>[16]</sup>
- The proposed State of Sequoyah was named in his honor.
- Sequoyah Research Center is dedicated to collecting and archiving Native American writing and literature.
- Mount Sequoyah in the Great Smoky Mountains.
- Mount Sequoyah in Fayetteville, Arkansas was named in honor of him after the city donated the top of East Mountain to the Methodist Assembly for a retreat.
- The Sequoyah Hills neighborhood of Knoxville, Tennessee.
- The Tennessee Valley Authority Sequoyah Nuclear Generating Station bears his name.
- The Sequoyah Marina on Norris Lake.
- The USS *Sequoia* was a long-time yacht used by American Presidents (now privately owned).
- Sequoyah Caverns and Ellis Homestead is in Valley Head, Alabama.<sup>[17]</sup>
- Sequoyah Country Club, Oakland California<sup>[18]</sup>
- Sequoyah Council – A Boy Scouts of America Council located in Northeast Tennessee.
- The Sequoyah Book Award is chosen annually by students in Oklahoma.
- Many schools have been named for him, including
  - Sequoyah High School (Georgia), Canton, Georgia
  - Sequoyah High School (Oklahoma), a Native American boarding school in Tahlequah, Oklahoma
  - Sequoyah High School (Tennessee), Madisonville, Tennessee
  - Sequoia High School (Redwood City, California)
  - Sequoyah Elementary School, Tahlequah, Oklahoma
  - Sequoia Elementary School, San Diego, California
  - Sequoyah Elementary School, Russellville, Arkansas
  - Sequoyah Middle School, Broken Arrow, Oklahoma
  - Sequoyah Elementary School, Derwood, Maryland



Bronze panel featuring *Sequoyah* (1939), by Lee Lawrie. Library of Congress John Adams Building, Washington, D.C.

## Notes

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- [4] "Sequoyah" (<http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-618&sug=y>), *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, accessed 3 Jan 2009
- [5] Fogelson, Raymond D. (1974). "On the Varieties of Indian History: Sequoyah and Traveller Bird". *Journal of Ethnic Studies* **2**.
- [6] London, 193
- [7] Robert Bieder, "Sault-ste-marie-and-the-war-of-1812" (<http://turtletalk.files.wordpress.com/2008/08/bieder-sault-ste-marie-and-the-war-of-1812.pdf>), *Indiana Magazine of History*, XCV (Mar 1999), accessed 13 Dec 2008
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- [10] G. C. (1820-08-13). "Invention of the Cherokee Alphabet". *Cherokee Phoenix* **1** (24).
- [11] Feeling, Durbin. *Cherokee-English Dictionary: Tsalagi-Yonega Didehlogwasdohdi*. Tahlequah, Oklahoma: Cherokee Nation, 1975: xvii
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- [14] Meredith, Howard L. *Bartley Milam: Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation*. Muskogee, Oklahoma: Indian University Press, 1985: 47. ISBN 0-940392-17-8
- [15] Sequoyah Birthplace Museum (<http://www.sequoyahmuseum.org/>)
- [16] Scheidt, Laurel. *Hiking Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks*. ([http://books.google.com/books?id=D2M\\_RRYDDecC&pg=PA68&lpg=PA68&dq=sequoia+sequoyah+tree&source=bl&ots=tNINUMwNIC&sig=Lil\\_8BQEbNYEU\\_ARfX\\_NKbrPGHE&hl=en&ei=EwpBSpOPHoyIsgOc8qX9CA&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=9](http://books.google.com/books?id=D2M_RRYDDecC&pg=PA68&lpg=PA68&dq=sequoia+sequoyah+tree&source=bl&ots=tNINUMwNIC&sig=Lil_8BQEbNYEU_ARfX_NKbrPGHE&hl=en&ei=EwpBSpOPHoyIsgOc8qX9CA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=9)) Guilford, CT: Globe Pequot Press, 2002: 68. ISBN 978-0-7627-1122-2 (retrieved through Google books, 23 June 2009)
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## External links

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  - The Cherokee Nation Official Website (<http://www.cherokee.org/>)
  - "The Official Cherokee Font" (<http://www.cherokee.org/PressRoom/Downloads/3/Default.aspx>) at the Cherokee Nation Official Website
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