

Excerpts from the book: The Chickasaw Nation:
A Short Sketch of a Noble People
By James Henry Malone 1922

George Gist, father of Sequoyah

About 1739 there came from Bavaria to Ebenezer a family of Swabia, Franconia ancestry, very different in character from the first settlers, being influenced by the hope of gain and having no religious aspirations. To this family was born a boy named George Gist; who grew up in ignorance, could speak only a few words in English or Cherokee, and was noted only for his cunning, lazy, and shiftless disposition, so that he could not procure a peddler's license, in lieu of which he became an illicit Indian trader. This boy was destined to become the father of the most illustrious North American Indian, the intellectual peer of the wisest men in the history of mankind....

The Cherokees had marked out a path from Augusta, Georgia, to their country, over which horsemen could ride to all parts of the Cherokee country. George Gist is said to have taken this path for the Cherokee country, with two pack horses laden with merchandise suitable for trade with the Indians.

Sequoyah's mother

There he met a Cherokee Indian girl who pleased his fancy, and she evidently was flattered by his professions, and they became husband and wife according to the customs of her people; and to her obligations in the marriage relation she was ever faithful, and proved a devoted mother, judged by the highest standards of the most enlightened people.

She came of a good family, her father being a chief in Great Echota, the town of refuge in the Cherokee nation, for they had a city of refuge similar to that of the ancient Jews, Great Echota being situated on the little Tennessee River, in what is now Monroe County, east Tennessee.

Speaking of the Indian wife, at p. 17 Foster says: " While our Dutch peddler smoked his home-made pipe around the fire or joined in the chase when his indolence would allow, she cultivated the maize, even cleared a piece of land for tillage; she helped put up a wigwam; she prepared and dried the skins, and fashioned them into clothing, and cooked his food over the wigwam fire. She even butchered the game, saddled the horses, and cared for them on his return; she brought the wood, fetched the water, and yet, though practically a slave, as she knew no better way, she was accounted a very happy woman. Her hope of happiness was based on her devotion to her husband; so the more she did for him, the more contented she became."

It is a singular fact that I have not seen the name of this remarkable woman in any of the books I have been able to read. I have written many letters to various persons, endeavoring to ascertain her name and at least some of the circumstances connected with her life. In a letter to Senator Robert L. Owens by Commissioner Sells, of January 21st, 1921, it is said, "I am informed by Mr. Frank Boudinot, an attorney residing at the Northbrook Courts, this city (Washington), that the name of the mother of Sequoyah, was Wut-teh." A letter directed by myself to Mr. Boudinot failed to elicit any reply.

Birth of Sequoyah

In this letter of Commissioner Sells, he also states that the native or Indian name of Sequoyah was Sikwayi, which accords with the various articles I have read. Gist soon wearied of this new life, and deserted his faithful and devoted wife, stealing away clandestinely and was never heard of again, sinking into oblivion which he so well deserved. In due course, about the year 1760, in the village of Taskigi on the Little Tennessee River, in what is now Monroe County, Tennessee, a baby boy was born to the deserted Indian mother, and it is said the mother named the babe Sequoyah (in the Indian tongue-Sikwayi), because in the musical Cherokee language that name meant, "He guessed it"; that is, the faithless father guessed it would be a boy. It may be added, however, that there is a dispute as to the origin of the name, and that Sequoyah generally was known among the white people as George Guess, which name he appears to have assumed, and he used the name "Guess" as a trade mark, by stamping it on the silver ornaments he made as a silversmith. The Cherokees to this day cherish his Indian name, and proudly call him Sequoyah.

The mother of Sequoyah had eight acres of land, some horses and cattle, and maintained herself and child by her own exertions, the boy soon joining his mother in her labors, making a new kind of wooden milk pan, building a milk-house over a cool gushing mountain spring; and when she contrived to get a small stock of goods, she taught him how to be a good judge of furs, and he went on hunting and trading excursions in the valleys of the Tennessee and Ohio Rivers, and came home laden with furs. Upon him the mother lavished all the fond affections of a mother's heart, and from her he evidently inherited all the energy and perseverance of his nature...

Sequoyah Becomes a Man

The large Spanish, French, and English coins which came into his hands were fashioned into rings, bracelets, necklaces, and other ornaments with so much skill that he became the most famous silversmith in all the land. He also turned his attention to art, and without a teacher drew sketches of deer, horses, cows, and other familiar objects, and though rude at first his skill so improved that his sketches presented a very good resemblance to the objects they were designed to represent; and he also became a most famous story-teller, and altogether we are not surprised that he easily became the most popular Cherokee in all the tribe.

Having lost his mother, it is said his home became the rendezvous for all the wild and gay young Indian warriors, and that Sequoyah for a time became dissipated, but exercising that strong will for which he was noted, he eventually cast aside forever his indulgence in intoxicating liquors.

Sequoyah grows up and marries

Sequoyah eventually married, and speaking of his wife Foster (p. 69) says: " This wife which Sequoyah took was no common Indian maiden. In form she was like the women of her race; she was tall, erect, and of a delicate frame; her features formed with perfect symmetry, and her countenance was cheerful and amiable. Both in her soul and that of Sequoyah was a higher intuition than appeared to be bestowed on any other of the Cherokee tribe. For a time their sympathies were one, and for a

time their lives were markedly happy. For all nature spoke in plainest utterances to them that which it only whispered unto others. " Every bird that sung, every scene of Nature seemed to inspire new thoughts and awaken new aspirations in Sequoyah. " Even the wind playing melodies on the tree leaves seemed to him like words of the Great Spirit, which his sensitive nature translated into words of wisdom. "

Nature was his teacher, through which he lived a life beyond the ken of all others in the Cherokee tribe. But as the honeymoon wore off, he became more meditative and philosophically inclined, and she more thoroughly practical. She worked and he dreamed, and thus their lives grew widely apart. She became a virago and on many a morning, in later years, the voice of Sequoyah's wife could be heard giving her lord 'Jesse' for the lack of such industry as she exclusively held in esteem. 'However,' says, Boudinot, the Executive Secretary of the nation, 'he seemed to have taken all his scoldings with great equanimity. No doubt he put himself in her place and made full allowance for the disagreeable prospect from her standpoint.' "

The Great Invention-

We have seen that from early childhood Sequoyah evinced an inventive talent and that he became an expert silversmith, but the crowning work of his life was his invention of the Cherokee syllabic alphabet, the simplest, most complete, and the most perfect in the long history of mankind. I realize that this is a sweeping statement, nevertheless it is true in every respect. If it should be supposed that this alphabet was but the product of genius, unaccompanied by study, toil, and self denial, there could not be a greater mistake. The germ, or underlying principles, involved in its production no doubt engaged the profound thoughts of Sequoyah for years before he gave himself entirely over to working out its details.

As might be expected, there are various reasons assigned as to the causes which led Sequoyah to enter upon years of labor to produce his alphabet. Some ascribe it to a taunting remark made by some of his companions, when, around the camp fire, Sequoyah casually stated that he could invent an alphabet equal to that of the white man. The party was discussing some written pages of a letter that had been found on a white captive prisoner, which they called "speaking leaves."

Stung by the incredulous taunts of his companions, it is claimed that then and there Sequoyah registered a secret vow to make good his statement. It is also said that in the troubles of the Cherokees with the white settlers, when the latter began encroaching on the territory of the Indians, it became a much debated question as to the source of the superiority of the white man over the Indian. Sequoyah in early life was a hunter and trader in furs, but met with an accident which made him a cripple for life. He was naturally of a contemplative disposition and had an inventive turn of mind. His physical affliction gave him more time for thought and reflection, and he came to the conclusion that the ability of the white man to read and write and thus transmit his thoughts, not only to the present, but future generations, was the mainspring of the superiority of the white man.

Inventing the syllabic alphabet

About the year 1809, without knowing any language except that of the Cherokee, and never having gone to school a day in his life, and, of course, without any education whatever, or any knowledge of the arts of the white man, he set to work to invent an alphabet for the Cherokees, and, retiring to the woods, and listening to all sounds, and comparing them with the words of the Cherokee language, after twelve years he put forth, in 1821, his alphabet, consisting of eighty-five characters. In the meantime he was ridiculed and laughed at; but nothing could dampen his ardor or check his labors. Not only many of his Indian friends, but the agents of the United States government residing among the Cherokees believed that his mind was affected, being unable to comprehend the nature of his labors.

The first plan of Sequoyah was recognizing sounds in nature which corresponded to tones in the Cherokee language, and then to represent this sound by drawing a picture of some natural object which made the sound; but he found that these pictures and characters so multiplied that no one could remember them, and after long labors along these lines, in which he had the assistance of his wife and children, he was finally compelled to abandon the plan.

The philosophy underlying the final plan upon which Sequoyah created his syllabic alphabet was to have one letter to represent each and every sound the human throat can utter. One letter would represent in this way parts of different words, with the result that the number of characters would be comparatively small.

Foster (p. 102) quotes Phillips in Harpers Magazine of September, 1870, as explaining more in detail the principles upon which the alphabet was constructed as follows: " Sequoyah discovered that the language possessed certain musical sounds, such as we call vowels, and dividing sounds, called by us consonants. In determining his vowels he varied, during the progress of discoveries, but finally settled on the six, a, e, i, o, u, and a guttural vowel sounding like « in ung. These had long and short sounds, with the exception of the guttural. He next considered his consonants, or dividing sounds, and estimated the number of combinations of these that would give all the sounds required to make words in their language. He first adopted fifteen for the dividing sounds, but settled on twelve primary, the g and k being one and sounding more like k than g, and d like t. These may be represented in English as g, h, l, m, n, qu, t, dl or //, ts, w, y, z. It will be seen that if these twelve be multiplied by six vowels, the number of possible combinations or syllables would be seventy-two, and by adding the vowel sounds which may be syllables, the number would be seventy-eight. However, the guttural M, or sound of u in ung, does not appear among the combinations, making seventy-seven. "

Still his work was not complete. The hissing sound of s entered into the ramification of so many sounds, as in sta, stu, spa, spe, that it would have required a large addition to his alphabet to meet this demand. This he simplified by using a distinct character for the s (oo) to be used in such combinations. To provide for the varying sounds g and k, he added a symbol, which has been written in English ka. As the syllable na is liable to be aspirated, he added symbols written nah and kna. To have distinct representatives for the combinations rising out of the different sounds of d and t, he added symbols for ta, te, ti and another for dla, thus tla. These completed the eighty-five characters of his alphabet of syllables and not of letters."

At the time Sequoyah completed his alphabet, he was living in a log cabin in Georgia in comparative poverty; and as he had spent so many years in working out his theory in poverty, the general opinion was that he was at least partially demented; hence he was unable to convince any one of the practical utility of his marvelous alphabet.

The New Written Language

As some of the Cherokees had moved to the new Arkansas country, he visited them there, and endeavored to have the Cherokees there understand his alphabet, and finally succeeded in having one write a letter to a friend back in Georgia, which he brought with him on his return home; and while his people wondered greatly when it was read, still they were not convinced. Sequoyah called a meeting of the most prominent men among the Cherokees, and also explained his alphabet to Col. Lowrey, the Indian agent, who lived only three miles from his cabin, and to all of them he explained in detail the principles of his alphabet; still they could not comprehend it.

Sequoyah had taught his alphabet to his little daughter, Ahyokeh, then only six years old, and sending her away he wrote down any word or sentiment his friends named, and when called back, she readily read what had been written. While Col. Lowrey at first thought that Sequoyah was deceiving himself, he finally began to doubt whether he was the deluded schemer which others thought him to be.

The syllabary was soon recognized by the Cherokees as an invaluable invention, and such was its simplicity and adaptability to the Cherokee language that money or schools and academies were unnecessary, for it could be easily learned in the tepee, or on the trail, and in a few months thousands of Cherokees could read and write in their language with ease and facility, thereby placing that nation far in advance of any other Indian tribe. The Cherokees, in recognition of Sequoyah's invention, presented him with a medal, and in 1828 he visited Washington and attracted much attention. In the treaty of that year he was given \$500.00 by the United States Congress for the great benefit he had conferred upon the Cherokee people in the invention of his wonderful alphabet.

The Last Days of Sequoyah

Where the mortal remains of Sequoyah rest, no man knows, though it is generally conceded that he died amid the towering peaks of the Rocky Mountain ranges. His ancient ancestors occupied the loftiest peaks of the Appalachian Mountains, and as intellectually he towered far above the average man, it seems fitting that he should have sought the lofty ranges of the West, after his people had been driven from their homes in the East, to breathe his last, and yield up his spirit to "The Beloved One who dwelleth in the blue sky."

This short sketch will not admit of the various versions as to the circumstances attending the last days of Sequoyah, much less the speculations as to where his body now sleeps; but in reference to his later years this much may be said: In 1823 he took up his permanent residence in Arkansas, where a portion of the tribe had been removed. He took a prominent part in the treaties by which the Cherokees, or the most of them, were moved from their homes in North Carolina to the West.

In his declining years Sequoyah withdrew from activities among the Cherokees, and once again gave himself over to speculative ideas. He conceived the idea that there should be elements of a common speech and grammar among the various Indian languages, and he traveled far and near among many tribes in a vain endeavor to demonstrate the correctness of his theory. There was a current tradition to the effect that in ancient times a band of Cherokees, forsaking their mountain home and kindred in the Appalachian range, had crossed the Mississippi River and found another home in a distant range of mountains in the West.

Sequoyah In the Hall of Fame

In 1911 the Legislature of the new State of Oklahoma honored itself in the passage of an act to place in the rotunda of bronze statue of Sequoyah, as a famous man from that state. The presentation was made, and the statue unveiled on June 6, 1917, Honorable Charles D. Carter, member of Congress from the third district of Oklahoma, himself a distinguished descendant of the intrepid Chickasaws, being chairman of the meeting.

The presentation speech was made by Senator Robert L. Owen, of Oklahoma, he being of Cherokee descent and a man of distinguished ability; and among other things he said: " It is a strange thing that no alphabet in all the world reaches the dignity, the simplicity, and the value of the Cherokee alphabet as invented by Sequoyah. The European alphabet goes too far in providing analysis of sound and permits such large variations in spelling that it is a task of years to learn how to spell correctly in any of the European languages. With the Sequoyah alphabet a Cherokee could learn to spell in one day. " Thus the labor of years was saved to the student. So great an intellectual accomplishment was this that Canon Kingsley named the great red cedars of California, which towered as high as four hundred feet into the air and which were twenty- five feet through at the base, 'sequoias,' because they were typical of the greatest native North American Indian."

Upon the same occasion Speaker Champ Clark said: "When I was a boy, my father believed in phonetics and I believe in phonetics. Sequoyah invented simply a large and complete phonetic system in which everything is spelled by sound, which is the correct way. If he had lived two thousand years ago and had invented his alphabet and had got people to use it, one-fifth of the time of the usual life could have been saved. (Applause.) On the average, we spend one-fifth of our lives learning how to spell and we don't know yet. (Laughter and applause.)"