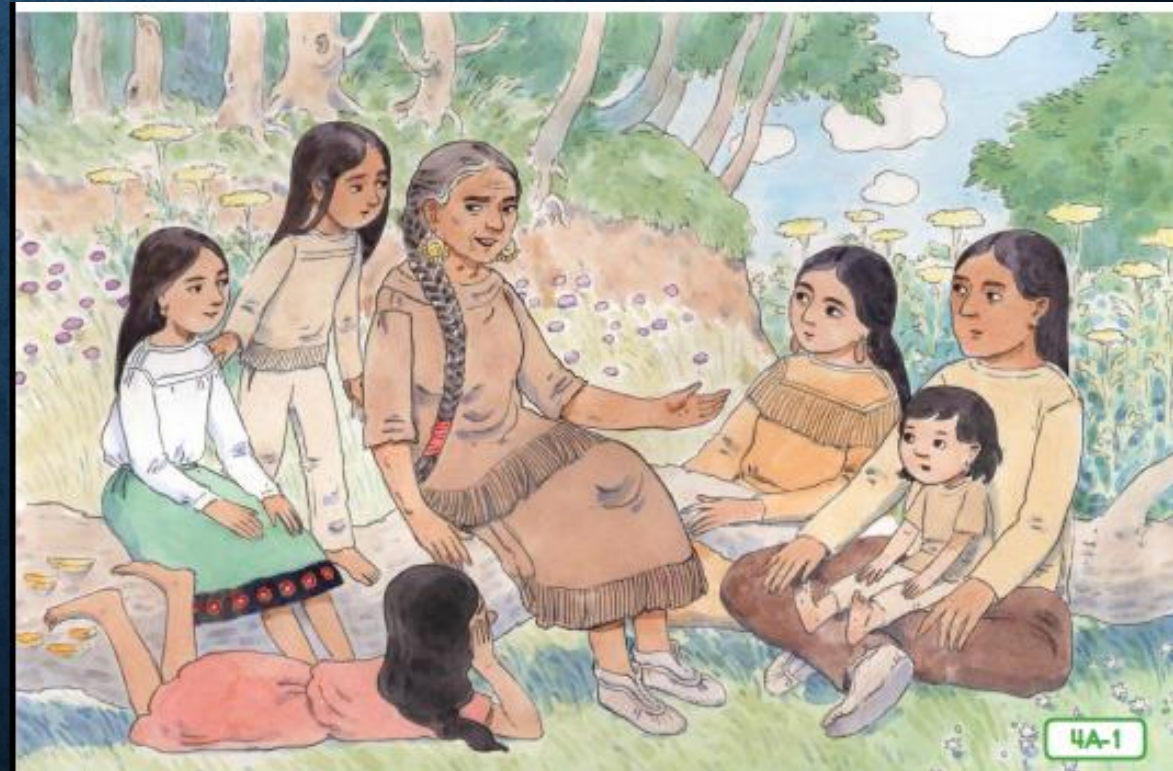


The Story of Sequoyah

People are not born knowing how to read and write. They have to learn these skills, just as they have to learn to talk. This is true for individuals like you and me, and it is also true for groups of people. In the early 1800s the Cherokee people had a spoken language they used to communicate, but they did not have a written language for reading and writing. The Cherokee were Native Americans who lived in what is now the southeastern United States. There were Cherokee settlements in Georgia, Tennessee, and the Carolinas.

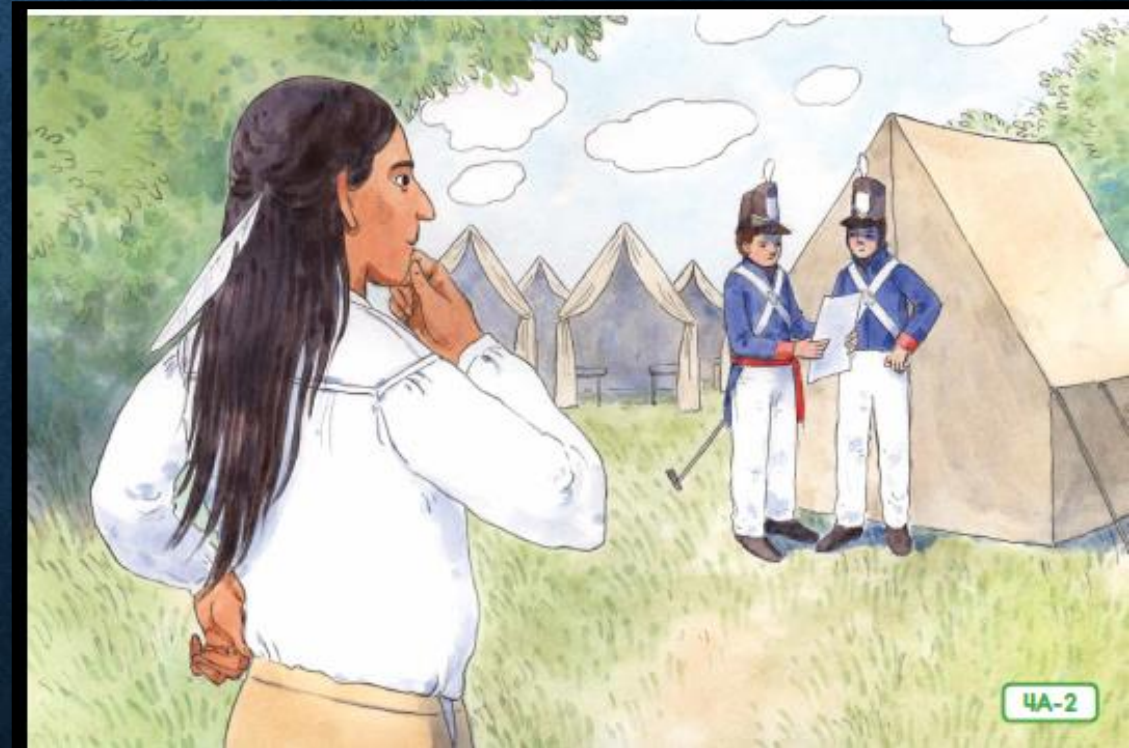
The Cherokee people had many folktales that had been told and retold for many **generations**. But none of these tales had ever been written down because the Cherokee kept and passed down meaningful information orally, or by talking. That changed because of the hard work and dedication of a Cherokee man named Sequoyah. Sequoyah was born in Tennessee. He grew up with his Cherokee family, speaking the Cherokee language. But Sequoyah, who was a farmer and a silversmith, also spent a lot of time **interacting** with the white settlers who were living near Cherokee lands.



Sequoyah believed that having a written language could make the Cherokee people even stronger. 4 In 1809, he began to think about creating a writing system for his native language. Three years later, during the War of 1812, Sequoyah and other Cherokee joined the United States under General Andrew Jackson to fight the British troops. There, Sequoyah observed how the U.S. Army officers sent and received messages. The idea of creating a written language was not new to him, but Sequoyah saw how useful reading and writing was when the officers needed to communicate. The Cherokee called the letters that the officers sent each other “talking leaves.” Sequoyah had seen how helpful they were for the soldiers. He was convinced it would be good if the Cherokee people could use “talking leaves,” too.

I can describe the connection between a series of historical events.

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When the war ended, Sequoyah kept working to develop a writing system for the Cherokee language. At first he tried to come up with a symbol for each word in the language. He spent a year trying to **create**, or make, symbols for all the words in the Cherokee language. Even after a year, he was still not done. Sequoyah was so busy with his project developing the symbols for the Cherokee written language that he didn't plant any crops that year. All he did was work on creating symbols. His wife was worried. She thought Sequoyah didn't know what he was doing. She thought he was just wasting his time. She did not understand what Sequoyah was trying to do. How would she and her children survive without crops? What were they supposed to eat? Some historians have recorded that, after a while, Sequoyah's wife was so upset that she gathered up all of Sequoyah's work and burned it. Others have said that his fellow Cherokee destroyed the symbols because they thought they would bring their people bad luck. Either way, Sequoyah's work went up in smoke. This was a heavy blow for Sequoyah. But, in a way, it was a good thing. It was good because Sequoyah realized the **approach**, or the way he had chosen to create the symbols, was not the best one.



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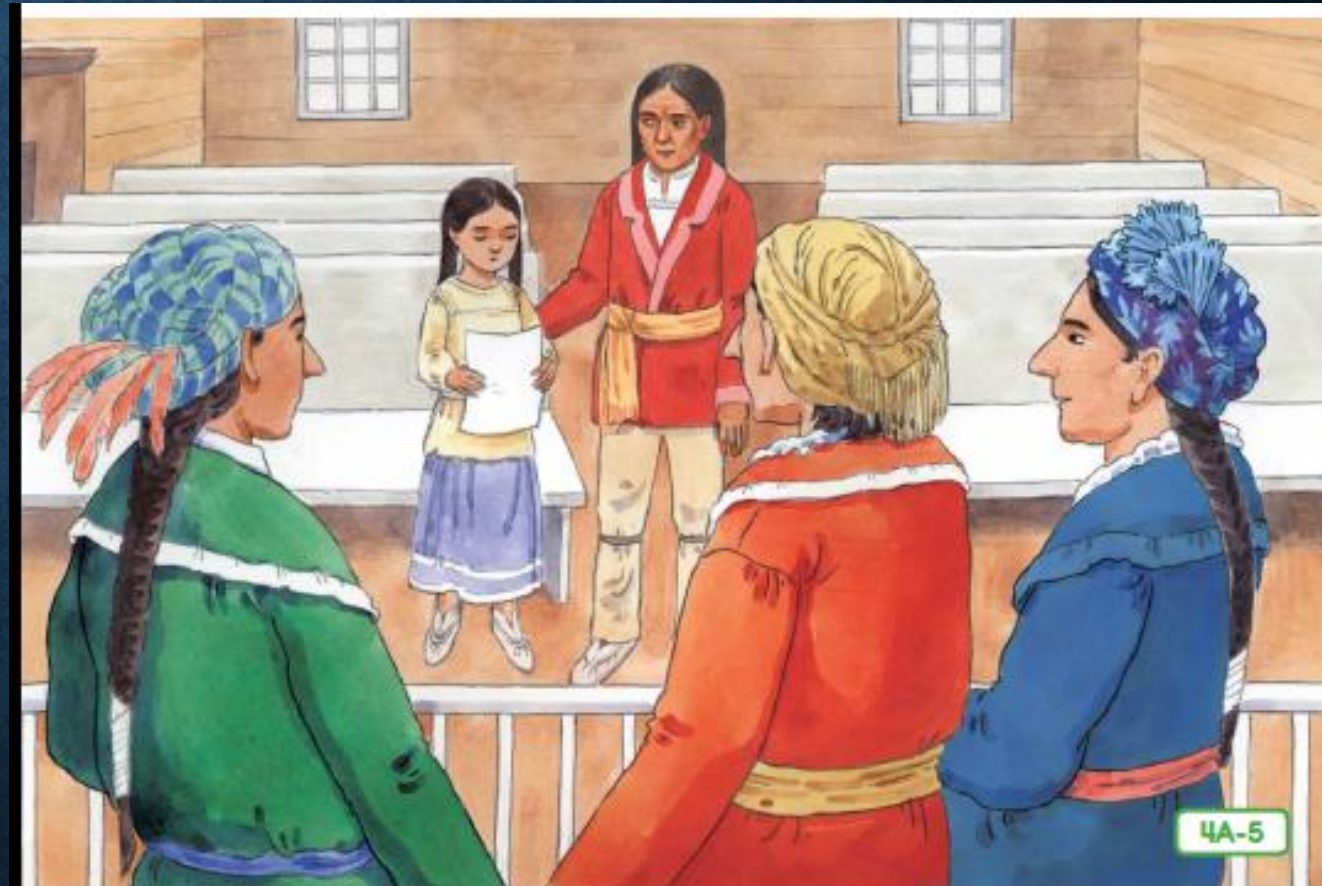
It is possible to make a writing system in which there is a different symbol for each word in the language. Writing systems of this sort do exist, but they took a long time to create and are very difficult to learn. Think what it would be like if we had to learn a different symbol for all of the tens of thousands of words in the English language. How would we ever remember all those symbols? Sequoyah knew there had to be a better way. There was a better way, and eventually he found it. Sequoyah realized that all Cherokee words were made up of syllables. So he created eighty-four symbols to represent all of the syllables in the Cherokee language. This was extraordinarily clever. Sequoyah had never learned to read and write, but he figured out a writing system for his native language. Once Sequoyah had come up with symbols for the eighty-four syllables in the Cherokee language, he was confident that he could teach other people to use them. He started by teaching his own daughter Ayoka [ah-YOH-kah]. Ayoka easily learned to read and write with the symbols Sequoyah created. Then Sequoyah went to show his writing system to the chiefs of the Cherokee nation.

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6 h	Ꮺ	Ꮻ	Ꮼ	Ꮽ	Ꮾ	Ꮿ
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8 l	W	Ᏺ	Ᏻ	G	M	Ᏽ
9 m	᏶	᏷	H	ᏸ	Y	—
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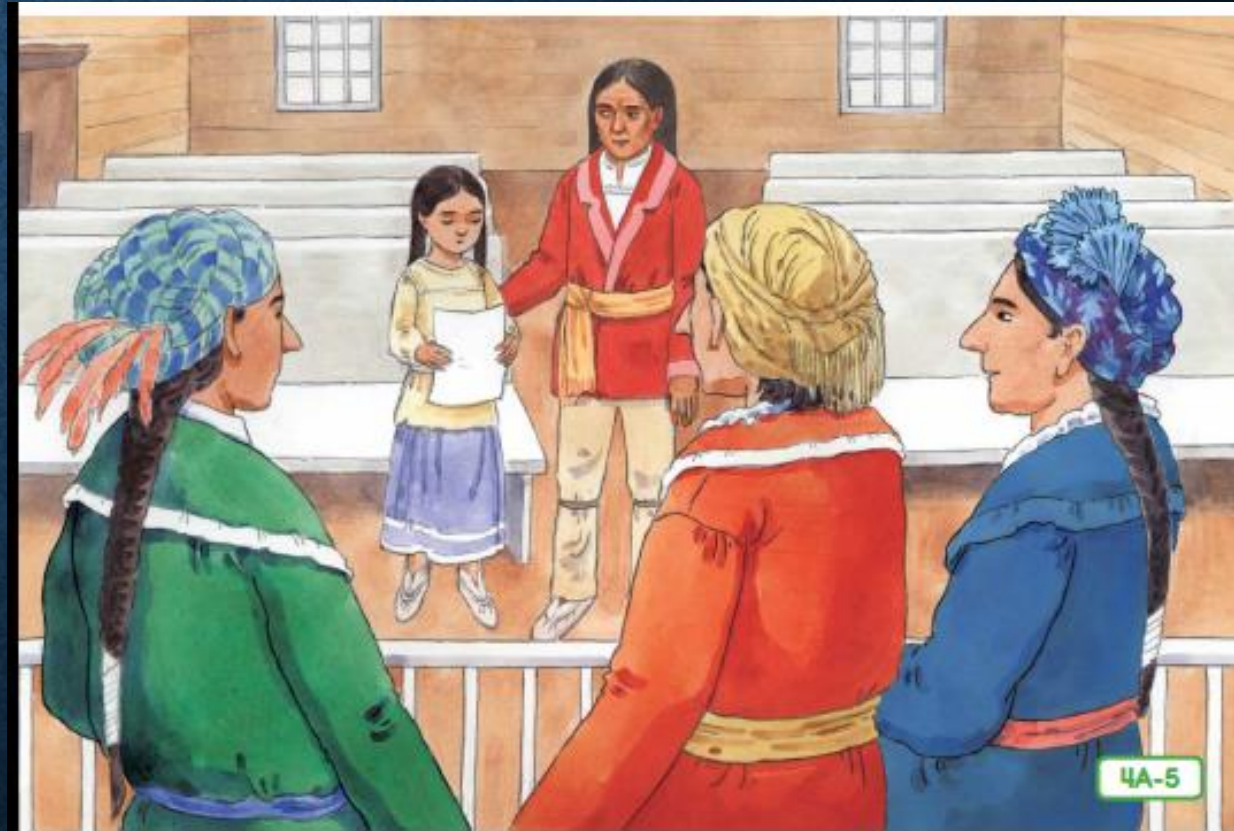
At first, the chiefs were skeptical. Some of them did not understand what Sequoyah was trying to do. Others thought his system might not really work. A few thought Sequoyah might be trying to trick them. Sequoyah had expected this. He told the chiefs he could prove that his system really worked. He would send Ayoka away. Then he would write down any words the chiefs wanted him to write. When he had done this, he would call Ayoka back and she would read the words. That way the chiefs could be sure Sequoyah was not tricking them.

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The chiefs agreed. Ayoka went away. One of the chiefs spoke some words in the Cherokee language. Sequoyah wrote down what he said, using his syllable symbols. Then they sent for Ayoka. When she returned, she read the words Sequoyah had written. The chiefs were impressed. But they were not convinced. They tried the same test a few more times, using different words each time. The chiefs had Sequoyah write the symbols and then called Ayoka in to read them. Then the chiefs had Ayoka write the symbols and called Sequoyah in to read them. Finally, the chiefs **concluded** that Sequoyah's writing system really did work!

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After all of his hard work, Sequoyah's writing system was accepted. He and Ayoka taught other Cherokee people to use the symbols—and that is how the Cherokee people learned to read and write. Later, many sad things happened to the Cherokee people. In the 1830s they were forced to leave their lands. Later they were forced onto reservations and into English-speaking classrooms. Thanks to Sequoyah's hard work, the Cherokee were able to keep their language alive. Even today, almost two hundred years later, the Cherokee language is written with symbols developed by Sequoyah.

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Sequoyah is remembered and honored as the man who taught his people to read and write. However, he is not only honored by the Cherokee people, he is considered to be a national hero, too. There is a statue of Sequoyah in the U.S. Capitol building. And, it is believed that the tall, strong sequoia trees that grow in California may have been named to honor the man who allowed his people to stand a little taller, too.

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Comprehension Questions

1. *Evaluative* What was the main topic of the read-aloud?
2. *Literal* What made Sequoyah famous?
3. *Inferential* Why did Sequoyah feel that writing down the Cherokee language was important?
4. *Inferential* Did people like what Sequoyah was doing at first? How do you know? What changed their minds?
5. *Evaluative* After Sequoyah's work was burned, he had to start over again. Describe the kind of writing he invented that the Cherokee still use today.
6. Does the English language have more symbols or fewer symbols than the Cherokee language?

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