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Cherokee syllabary - Wikipedia

21-26 minutes

Cherokee	
<div>GWY</div> <div><i>Tsa-la-gi</i> ("Cherokee") written in the Cherokee syllabary</div>	
Type	Syllabary
Languages	Cherokee language
Time period	1820s ^[1] – present ^[2]
Direction	Left-to-right
ISO 15924	Cher, 445
Unicode alias	Cherokee
Unicode range	<div><ul style="list-style-type: none">U+13A0–U+13FF CherokeeU+AB70–U+ABBF Cherokee Supplement</div>
<div>This article contains IPA phonetic symbols. Without proper rendering support, you may see question marks, boxes, or other symbols instead of Unicode characters. For an introductory guide on IPA symbols, see Help:IPA.</div>	

Part of a series on the
Cherokee language
<div>GWY ᏍᏏᏳᏏ ᏩᏍᏏᏳᏏ</div> <div><i>Tsalagi Gawonihisdi</i></div>
History
<div><ul style="list-style-type: none">Cherokee syllabarySequoyah</div>
Grammar

• Verbs
Writing System
• Cherokee syllabary
Phonology
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The **Cherokee syllabary** is a [syllabary](#) invented by [Sequoyah](#) in the late 1810s and early 1820s to write the [Cherokee language](#). His creation of the syllabary is particularly noteworthy as he could not previously read any script.^[3] He first experimented with [logograms](#), but his system later developed into a syllabary. In his system, each symbol represents a [syllable](#) rather than a single [phoneme](#); the 85 (originally 86) characters provide a suitable method to write Cherokee. Although some symbols resemble [Latin](#), [Greek](#), and [Cyrillic](#) letters, they are not used to represent the same sounds.

Description[\[edit\]](#)



[Sequoyah](#), inventor of the Cherokee syllabary

Each of the characters represents one syllable, as in the [Japanese kana](#) and the [Bronze Age Greek Linear B](#) writing systems. The first six characters represent isolated [vowel](#) syllables. Characters for combined consonant and vowel syllables then follow.

The charts below show the syllabary in recitation order, left to right, top to bottom as arranged by [Samuel Worcester](#), along with his commonly used transliterations. He played a key role in the development of [Cherokee printing](#) from 1828 until his death in 1859.

The transliteration working from the syllabary uses conventional consonants like *qu*, *ts*,..., and may differ from the ones used in the phonological orthographies (first column in the below chart, in the "d/t system").

The chart below uses [Unicode](#) characters from the [Cherokee](#) block. For an image alternative, see [File:Cherokee Syllabary.svg](#).

Consonant	a	e	i	o	u	v
-----------	---	---	---	---	---	---

Ø	D	a				R	e		T	i		Ꭰ	o	Ꭱ	u	i	v
g / k	Ꭶ	ga	Ꭷ	ka		Ꭵ	ge		Ꭶ	gi		Ꭰ	go	Ꭱ	gu	Ꭲ	gv
h	Ꭶ	ha				Ꭶ	he		Ꭶ	hi		Ꭶ	ho	Ꭶ	hu	Ꭶ	hv
l / hl	Ꭶ	la				Ꭶ	le		Ꭶ	li		Ꭶ	lo	Ꭶ	lu	Ꭶ	lv
m	Ꭶ	ma				Ꭶ	me		Ꭶ	mi		Ꭶ	mo	Ꭶ	mu	*	
n / hn	Ꭶ	na	Ꭶ	hna	G	nah	Ꭶ	ne		Ꭶ	ni		Ꭶ	no	Ꭶ	nu	Ꭶ
gw / kw	Ꭶ	qua				Ꭶ	que		Ꭶ	qui		Ꭶ	quo	Ꭶ	quu	Ꭶ	quv
s	Ꭶ	s	Ꭶ	sa		Ꭶ	se		Ꭶ	si		Ꭶ	so	Ꭶ	su	Ꭶ	sv
d / t	Ꭶ	da	Ꭶ	ta		Ꭶ	de	Ꭶ	te	Ꭶ	di	Ꭶ	ti	Ꭶ	do	Ꭶ	du
dl / tl (hl)	Ꭶ	dla	Ꭶ	tla		Ꭶ	tle		Ꭶ	tli		Ꭶ	tlo	Ꭶ	tlu	Ꭶ	tlv
j / c (dz / ts)	Ꭶ	tsa				Ꭶ	tse		Ꭶ	tsi		Ꭶ	tso	Ꭶ	tsu	Ꭶ	tsv
w / hw	Ꭶ	wa				Ꭶ	we		Ꭶ	wi		Ꭶ	wo	Ꭶ	wu	Ꭶ	wv
y / hy	Ꭶ	ya				Ꭶ	ye		Ꭶ	yi		Ꭶ	yo	Ꭶ	yu	Ꭶ	yv

* The character G was previously used to represent the syllable *mv* (GG), but is no longer used.^{[[note 1](#)]}

The Latin letter 'v' in the transcriptions, seen in the last column, represents a [nasal vowel](#), /ə̃/.

The Cherokee character Ꭶ *does* have a different orientation in old documents, resembling a Greek Λ (or barless A) rather than a Latin V as in modern documents.^{[[note 2](#)]}

There is also a handwritten cursive form of the syllabary;^{[[12](#)]} notably, the handwritten glyphs bear little resemblance to the printed forms.

Detailed considerations^{[[edit](#)]}

The phonetic values of these characters do not equate directly to those represented by the letters of the Latin script. Some characters represent two distinct phonetic values (actually heard as different syllables), while others may represent multiple variations of the same syllable. Not all [phonemic](#) distinctions of the spoken language are represented:

- Aspirated consonants are generally not distinguished from their plain counterpart. For example, while /d/ + vowel syllables are mostly differentiated from /t/ + vowel by use of different [glyphs](#), syllables beginning with /gw/ are all conflated with those beginning with /kw/.
- Long vowels are not distinguished from short vowels. However, in more recent technical literature, length of vowels can actually be indicated using a colon, and other disambiguation methods for consonants (somewhat like the [Japanese dakuten](#)) have been suggested.
- Tones are not marked.
- Syllables ending in vowels, *h*, or glottal stop are not differentiated. For example, the single symbol Ꭶ is used to represent both *suú* as in *suúdáli*, meaning "six" (ᎦᎢᎠ), and *súh* as in *súhdi*, meaning

"fishhook" (ᄆᄃ).

- There is no regular rule for representing [consonant clusters](#). When consonants other than *s*, *h*, or glottal stop arise in clusters with other consonants, a vowel must be inserted, chosen either arbitrarily or for etymological reasons (reflecting an underlying etymological vowel, see [vowel deletion](#) for instance). For example, ᄆᄃᄆᄃᄃ (tsu-na-s-di) represents the word *juunsdǵi*, meaning "small (pl.), babies". The consonant cluster *ns* is broken down by insertion of the vowel *a*, and is spelt as ᄆᄃᄆ /nas/. The vowel is etymological as *juunsdǵi* is composed of the morphemes *di-uunii-^{as}dǵi* (DIST-3B.pl-small), where *a* is part of the root. The vowel is included in the transliteration, but is not pronounced.

As with some other underspecified writing systems (like [Arabic](#)), adult speakers can distinguish words by context.

If a labial consonant such as *p* or *b* appears in a borrowed word or name, it is written using the *qu* row. This /kw/ ~ /p/ correspondence is a known linguistic phenomenon that exists elsewhere (cf. [P-Celtic](#), [Osco-Umbrian](#)).

Transliteration issues[[edit](#)]

Some Cherokee words pose a problem for transliteration software because they contain adjacent pairs of single letter symbols that (without special provisions) would be combined when doing the back-conversion from Latin script to Cherokee. Here are a few examples:

- ᄆᄃᄆᄃᄃᄃᄃ = *itsalisanedi* = *i-tsa-li-s-a-ne-di*
- ᄆᄃᄆᄃᄃᄃᄃᄃᄃ = *uligiysanvne* = *u-li-gi-yu-s-a-nv-ne*
- ᄆᄃᄆᄃᄃᄃᄃ = *uniyesiyi* = *u-ni-ye-s-i-yi*
- ᄆᄃᄃᄃᄃ = *nasiya* = *na-s-i-ya*

For these examples, the back conversion is likely to join *s-a* as *sa* or *s-i* as *si*. One solution is to use an apostrophe to separate the two, ^{[[citation needed](#)]} as is done in Japanese (e.g.: [Man'yōgana](#)): *itsalis'anedi*.

Other Cherokee words contain character pairs that entail overlapping transliteration sequences. Examples:

- ᄆᄃ transliterates as *nahna*, yet so does ᄆᄃᄃ. The former is *nah-na*, the latter is *na-hna*.

If the Latin script is parsed from left to right, longest match first, then without special provisions, the back conversion would be wrong for the latter. There are several similar examples involving these character combinations: *naha nahe nahi naho nahu nahv*.

A further problem encountered in transliterating Cherokee is that there are some pairs of different Cherokee words that transliterate to the same word in the Latin script. Here are some examples:

- ᄆᄃᄃᄃᄃ and ᄆᄃᄃ both transliterate to *aseno*
- ᄆᄃᄃᄃᄃ and ᄆᄃᄃᄃ both transliterate to *gesvi*

Without special provision, a round trip conversion may change ᄆᄃᄃᄃᄃ to ᄆᄃᄃ and change ᄆᄃᄃᄃᄃ to ᄆᄃᄃ.

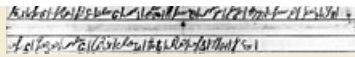
Character orders[[edit](#)]

Original Cherokee syllabary order, with the now obsolete letter G in red

- ## Numerals[[edit](#)]


Early history[[edit](#)]





Sequoyah's original syllabary characters, showing both the script forms and the print forms

External video

 [The Cherokee Syllabary](#), NCLLP^[15]

Around 1809, impressed by the "talking leaves" of European written languages, Sequoyah began work to create a writing system for the Cherokee language. After attempting to create a character for each word, Sequoyah realized this would be too difficult and eventually created characters to represent syllables. He worked on the syllabary for twelve years before completion and dropped or modified most of the characters he originally created.

After the syllabary was completed in the early 1820s, it achieved almost instantaneous popularity and spread rapidly throughout Cherokee society. By 1825, the majority of Cherokees could read and write in their newly developed orthography.

Some of Sequoyah's most learned contemporaries immediately understood that the syllabary was a great invention. For example, when [Albert Gallatin](#), a politician and trained linguist, saw a copy of Sequoyah's syllabary, he believed it was superior to the English alphabet.^[*clarification needed*] He recognized that even though the Cherokee student must learn 85 characters instead of 26 for English, the Cherokee could read immediately after learning all the symbols. The Cherokee student could accomplish in a few weeks what students of English writing might require two years to achieve.^[18]

In 1828, the order of the characters in a chart and the shapes of the characters were modified by Cherokee author and editor [Elias Boudinot](#) to adapt the syllabary to printing presses.^[19] The 86th character was dropped entirely. Following these changes, the syllabary was adopted by the [Cherokee Phoenix](#) newspaper, later [Cherokee Advocate](#), followed by the *Cherokee Messenger*, a bilingual paper printed in [Indian Territory](#) in the mid-19th century.

In 1834, Worcester made changes to several characters in order to improve the readability of Cherokee text. Most notably, he inverted the *do* character (V) so that it could not be confused with the *go* character (A). Otherwise, the characters remained remarkably invariant until the advent of new typesetting technologies in the 20th century.

Later developments^{[[edit](#)]}





In the 1960s, the Cherokee Phoenix Press began publishing literature in the Cherokee syllabary, including the *Cherokee Singing Book*. A Cherokee syllabary typewriter ball was developed for the [IBM Selectric](#) in the late 1970s. Computer fonts greatly expanded Cherokee writers' ability to publish in Cherokee. In 2010, a Cherokee keyboard cover was developed by [Roy Boney, Jr.](#) and [Joseph Erb](#), facilitating more rapid typing in Cherokee. The keyboard cover is now used by students in the [Cherokee Nation](#) Immersion School, where all coursework is written in syllabary.^[19]

In August 2010, the [Oconaluftee Institute for Cultural Arts](#) in [Cherokee, North Carolina](#) acquired a letterpress and had the Cherokee syllabary recast to begin printing one-of-a-kind fine art books and prints in syllabary.^[25] Artists Jeff Marley and [Frank Brannon](#) completed a collaborative project on October 19, 2013, in which they printed using Cherokee syllabary type from [Southwestern Community College](#) in the print shop at [New Echota](#). This was the first time syllabary type has been used at New Echota since 1835.^[26]

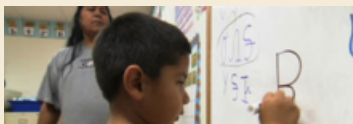
In 2015 the Unicode Consortium encoded a lowercase version of the script, since typists would often set Cherokee with two different point sizes, so as to mark beginnings of sentences and given names (as in the Latin alphabet). Handwritten Cherokee also shows a difference in lower- and uppercase letters, such as descenders and ascenders.^[27] Lowercase Cherokee has already been encoded in the font [Everson Mono](#).

The syllabary is finding increasingly diverse usage today, from books, newspapers, and websites to the street signs of [Tahlequah, Oklahoma](#) and [Cherokee, North Carolina](#). An increasing corpus of children's literature is printed in Cherokee to meet the needs of students in Cherokee language immersion schools in Oklahoma and North Carolina.^[28]

Possible influence on Liberian Vai syllabary^[edit]

In recent years evidence has emerged suggesting that the Cherokee syllabary provided a model for the design of the [Vai syllabary](#) in [Liberia](#), Africa. The Vai syllabary emerged about 1832/33. The link appears to have been Cherokee who emigrated to Liberia after the invention of the Cherokee syllabary (which in its early years spread rapidly among the Cherokee) but before the inventions of the Vai syllabary. One such man, Austin Curtis, married into a prominent [Vai](#) family and became an important Vai chief himself. It is perhaps not coincidence that the "inscription on a house" that drew the world's attention to the existence of the Vai script was in fact on the home of Curtis, a Cherokee. There also appears to be a connection between an early form of written [Bassa](#) and the earlier Cherokee syllabary.

Classes^[edit]





Oklahoma [Cherokee language](#) immersion school student writing in the Cherokee syllabary.

Cherokee language classes typically begin with a transliteration of Cherokee into Roman letters, only later incorporating the syllabary. The Cherokee language classes offered through [Haskell Indian Nations University](#), [Northeastern State University](#),^[19] the [University of Oklahoma](#), the [University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma](#), [Western Carolina University](#), the [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill](#), and the immersion elementary schools offered by the Cherokee Nation and the [Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians](#),^[30] such as [New Kituwah Academy](#), all teach the syllabary. The fine arts degree program at [Southwestern Community College](#) incorporates the syllabary in its printmaking classes.^[25]

Unicode^[edit]

Cherokee was added to the [Unicode](#) Standard in September, 1999 with the release of version 3.0. On June 17, 2015, with the release of version 8.0, Cherokee was redefined as a [bicameral script](#); the character repertoire was extended to include a complete set of lowercase Cherokee letters as well as the archaic character (G).

Blocks^[edit]

The first Unicode block for Cherokee is U+13A0–U+13FF. It contains all 86 uppercase letters, together with six lowercase letters:^[note 3]

Cherokee^{[1][2]}
[Official Unicode Consortium code chart](#) (PDF)

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	A	B	C	D	E	F
U+13Ax	D	R	T	Ꮓ	Ꮕ	i	Ꮗ	Ꮘ	F	y	A	J	E	Ꮚ	Ꮛ	Ꮜ
U+13Bx	F	Γ	Ꮝ	W	Ꮟ	Ꮠ	G	M	Ꮤ	Ꮥ	Ꮦ	H	Ꮧ	Ꮨ	Ꮩ	Ꮪ
U+13Cx	G	Ꮮ	Ꮯ	Z	Ꮫ	Ꮬ	T	Ꮯ	Ꮮ	Ꮰ	Ꮱ	Ꮲ	Ꮳ	Ꮴ	Ꮵ	Ꮶ
U+13Dx	Ꮹ	Ꮺ	R	Ꮼ	W	S	Ꮾ	Ꮿ	V	S	Ᏹ	Ᏺ	Ᏻ	Ᏼ	Ᏽ	C
U+13Ex	᏶	᏷	P	G	ᏺ	ᏻ	K	ᏽ	C	G	᏿	᐀	ᐁ	ᐂ	ᐃ	ᐄ
U+13Fx	ᐅ	ᐆ	ᐇ	ᐈ	B	G			ᐊ	ᐋ	ᐌ	ᐍ	B	G		

Notes

1. [^] As of Unicode version 13.0

2. [^] Grey areas indicate non-assigned code points

The Cherokee Supplement block is U+AB70–U+ABBF. It contains the remaining 80 lowercase letters.

Cherokee Supplement^[1]

[Official Unicode Consortium code chart](#) (PDF)

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	A	B	C	D	E	F
U+AB7x	D	R	T	Ꮟ	Ꮠ	i	Ꮣ	Ꮤ	Ꮥ	y	A	J	E	Ꮧ	Ꮨ	Ꮩ
U+AB8x	Ꮪ	Ꮫ	Ꮬ	W	Ꮮ	Ꮯ	G	M	Ꮰ	Ꮱ	H	Ꮲ	Ꮳ	Ꮴ	Ꮵ	Ꮶ
U+AB9x	Ꮷ	Ꮸ	Ꮹ	Z	Ꮻ	Ꮼ	I	Ꮾ	Ꮿ	Ᏸ	Ᏹ	Ᏺ	Ᏻ	Ᏼ	Ᏽ	᏶
U+ABAx	᏷	ᏸ	ᏹ	ᏺ	ᏻ	ᏼ	ᏽ	᏾	᏿	V	S	᏿	᏾	ᏼ	ᏽ	᏾
U+ABBx	᏿	᏾	P	C	᏿	᏾	k	᏿	᏾	᏿	᏾	᏿	᏾	᏿	᏾	᏿

Notes

- ¹ [^] As of Unicode version 13.0

Fonts[\[edit\]](#)

A single Cherokee Unicode font, Plantagenet Cherokee, is supplied with [macOS](#), version 10.3 (Panther) and later. [Windows Vista](#) also includes a Cherokee font. Several free Cherokee fonts are available including Digohweli, Donisiladv, and [Noto Sans Cherokee](#). Some pan-Unicode fonts, such as [Code2000](#), [Everson Mono](#), and [GNU FreeFont](#), include Cherokee characters. A commercial font, Phoreus Cherokee, published by TypeCulture, includes multiple weights and styles.^[31]

See also[\[edit\]](#)

- [Canadian Aboriginal syllabics](#)
- [Cree syllabics](#)
- [Writing system](#)

Notes[\[edit\]](#)

- ¹ [^] Most sources, including materials produced by the Cherokee Nation, state that this character represented the *mv* syllable.^{[7][8][9]} However, Worcester wrote that it represented a syllable similar to *hv*, but more open.
- ² [^] There is a difference between the old form of *do* (Λ-like) and the modern form of *do* (V-like). The standard Digohweli font displays the modern form. Old Do Digohweli and Code2000 fonts both display the old form.^[11]
- ³ [^] The PDF Unicode chart shows the modern form of the letter *do*.

References[\[edit\]](#)

- ¹ [^] [Sturtevant & Fogelson 2004](#), p. 337.
- ² [^] ["Cherokee language"](#). *www.britannica.com. Encyclopædia Britannica*. Retrieved 22 May 2014.
- ³ [^] [Diamond, Jared \(1999\). *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. New York:](#)

Norton. p. [228](#). [ISBN 0393317552](#).

4. [^] ["Syllabary Chart"](#) (PDF). Cherokee Nation. Retrieved 15 January 2018.
5. [^] Cushman 2013, p. 93.
6. [^] ["Cherokee: Range: 13A0–13FF"](#) (PDF). The Unicode Standard, Version 9.0. Retrieved 10 June 2017.
7. [^] "Cherokee", [Language geek font download](#)
8. [^] ["Cherokee language, writing system and pronunciation"](#). [Omniglot](#). sec. "Hand-written Cherokee syllabary".
9. [^] ["The North Carolina Language and Life Project"](#). Retrieved April 2, 2016.
10. [^] Langguth, A. J. (2010). *Driven West: Andrew Jackson and the Trail of Tears to the Civil War*. New York, Simon & Schuster. p. 71. [ISBN 978-1-4165-4859-1](#).
11. [^] [Jump up to: ^a ^b ^c "Cherokee Nation creates syllabary"](#). Indian Country Today. March 16, 2010. Archived from [the original](#) on October 1, 2016. Retrieved 5 November 2019.
12. [^] [Jump up to: ^a ^b "Letterpress arrives at OICA" Archived November 30, 2010, at the Wayback Machine](#) Southwestern Community College (retrieved 21 Nov 2010)
13. [^] ["New Echota days begin this Saturday"](#). Calhoun Times. Oct 18, 2013. Retrieved 21 July 2017.
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15. [^] Neal, Dale (2016-05-26). ["Beloved children's book translated into Cherokee"](#). Asheville Citizen Times. Retrieved 28 February 2019.
16. [^] ["Cherokee Language Revitalization Project." Archived 2010-05-28 at the Wayback Machine](#) Western Carolina University. (retrieved 23 Aug 2010)
17. [^] ["Phoreus Cherokee"](#). TypeCulture. Retrieved 15 January 2018.

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Further reading[[edit](#)]

- Cowen, Agnes (1981), *Cherokee syllabary primer*, Park Hill, OK: Cross-Cultural Education Center, [ASIN B00341DPR2](#).

External links[[edit](#)]

- [Cherokee](#) (report), Omniglot.
- "Sequoyah", [Cherokee](#) (online conversion tool), Transliteration.