



## **Signs of Cherokee Culture: Sequoyah's Syllabary in Eastern Cherokee**

**Life.** Margaret Bender. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. 187 pp.

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More than 180 years has passed since Sequoyah introduced his syllabary, making him the first person in recorded history to devise a writing system without first being literate in some language. More importantly, his creation, in 1821, transformed the Cherokee people from a pre-literate to a literate society in a matter of months. Soon after the Cherokees began using the syllabary as the primary means of documented communication, they achieved a higher literacy rate than their white neighbors. Literacy for the Cherokees facilitated rapid advancements in politics and commerce. Within a few years, laws and public documents were written in Cherokee, and a campaign was started to buy a printing press and cast type for the 85 characters that Sequoyah created to represent each of the sounds that he heard in spoken Cherokee. As printed, his syllabary represents the sounds of six vowels, 78 consonant-vowel combinations, and one separate consonant /s/.

By 1828, the Cherokees had a constitutional government and the first national, Native American bi-lingual newspaper published in the United States. Hundreds of religious tracts, hymnbooks, and even works of fiction were also published in the syllabary. Sequoyah received a literary pension from the Cherokee Nation for his accomplishment, and his writing system helped sustain the use of the Cherokee language at a time when English was becoming the language of necessity. As Bender shows, the writing system was in widespread use in the mid-nineteenth century, but after that declined with the growing emphasis on English education and skills needed to compete in the outside world. The use of the syllabary remained strong, however, in religious contexts for both traditionalists and protestant Christians. Since it is non-phonetic, the syllabary has also served as a written code for Cherokee speakers. Since it is so distinctly and recognizably Cherokee, the syllabary has also become incorporated into the cultural iconography.

In recent years, as Bender reports, use of the syllabary is on the increase in education, publications, official documentation, and public signage among the Eastern Cherokees. Bender also examines the connection between the role of the syllabary and tourism, so important to the Cherokee economy. The increased use of the syllabary in graphics associated with gifts and souvenirs reflects changing attitudes in public presentation of Cherokee culture. Although English is now the predominant language on the Qualla Boundary (the Eastern Cherokee reserve in North Carolina), the syllabary continues to draw attention to the uniqueness and resilience of the



community's heritage. It remains an important element of Cherokee identity, and use of the syllabary is seen as a means to assert that identity. This is especially true in connection with cultural tourism, which is seen not only as an historical phenomenon but also as a vital part of the community's future.

The author's extensive fieldwork, conducted among the Eastern Band of Cherokees in western North Carolina, provides fascinating insights into a community that has adapted significantly in order to compete successfully in the modern world. At the same time, the community has also clung tenaciously to a culture and language that is based on millennia of experience in the southern Appalachian area. The syllabary serves a visual reminder of the connection to that heritage. Most users of the syllabary, Bender notes, acquired proficiency as adults to become language teachers, or in order to be able to read religious texts and medicinal formulas. As concerted efforts are made in the education system to preserve and promote the Cherokee language, the future use of the syllabary will bear witness to the success of the community's educational priorities.

Bender's research examines in-depth the historic and contemporary use of the Sequoyan syllabary, a subtlety of Cherokee culture that often goes un-noticed by visitors, and whose importance goes beyond that ascribed by the people who use it.

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