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Douglas Wilms

## A Note on the District Boundaries of the Cherokee Nation, 1820\*

BY DOUGLAS C. WILMS

The size of the Cherokee Nation was continuously reduced from the beginning of European contact. Originally occupying areas that bordered the Ohio River in the north to areas in mid-Georgia and southern South Carolina in the south, the Cherokees eventually found themselves in possession of a greatly diminished area by the time of their final land cession. At that time their territory occupied lands in present-day North Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia.

By the 1820's the Cherokees resolved that they would no longer cede land to the Federal government and would continue to occupy their remaining acreage. They adopted a written constitution and a code of laws in 1820.<sup>1</sup> In conjunction with these legislative acts the Cherokees resolved to divide their nation into eight districts. Well-defined civil divisions are necessary for effective judicial, administrative, and service functions of government. The eight districts of the Cherokee Nation clearly served judicial purposes. Council houses, for example, established for the purpose of holding trials, were built in each district. One district judge and one marshal was assigned to each. One circuit judge was appointed for every two districts and a company of light horse was assigned to each circuit judge.

Any local or regional inventory of land use for purposes of taxation, study, or analysis is usually confined to, or composed of, smaller civil divisions. These divisions and subdivisions provide a convenient standard for comparison. The Cherokee Nation eventually used its newly delimited districts for such purposes. Population, livestock, agricultural equipment, and other statistics were gathered by district in a manner similar to present-day census data-gathering techniques.

The district boundaries of the Cherokee Nation have never been cartographically delimited. The complex "metes and bounds" system of land surveying so prevalent at that time has undoubtedly added to the difficulty. However, one can transfer complex documentary evidence into reliable cartographic representation. Figure 1 depicts these eight district boundaries as reconstructed according to the evidence presented in the *Laws of the Cherokee Nation*.<sup>2</sup> This map of the district boundaries will permit future researchers to plot and map the distribution of the Cherokees and their holdings and thereby come to a better understanding of their economic development prior to removal in 1838.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>James Mooney, "Myths of the Cherokees," *American Anthropological Association Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 1897-1898*, Pt. 1 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1900), pp. 106-107, 112.

<sup>2</sup>Information on the district boundaries was also gleaned from the *American Saw Papers*, Indian Affairs, II (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1841), pp. 280-281.

<sup>3</sup>The author will be pleased to send to interested readers an 8" x 10" copy of the above map.

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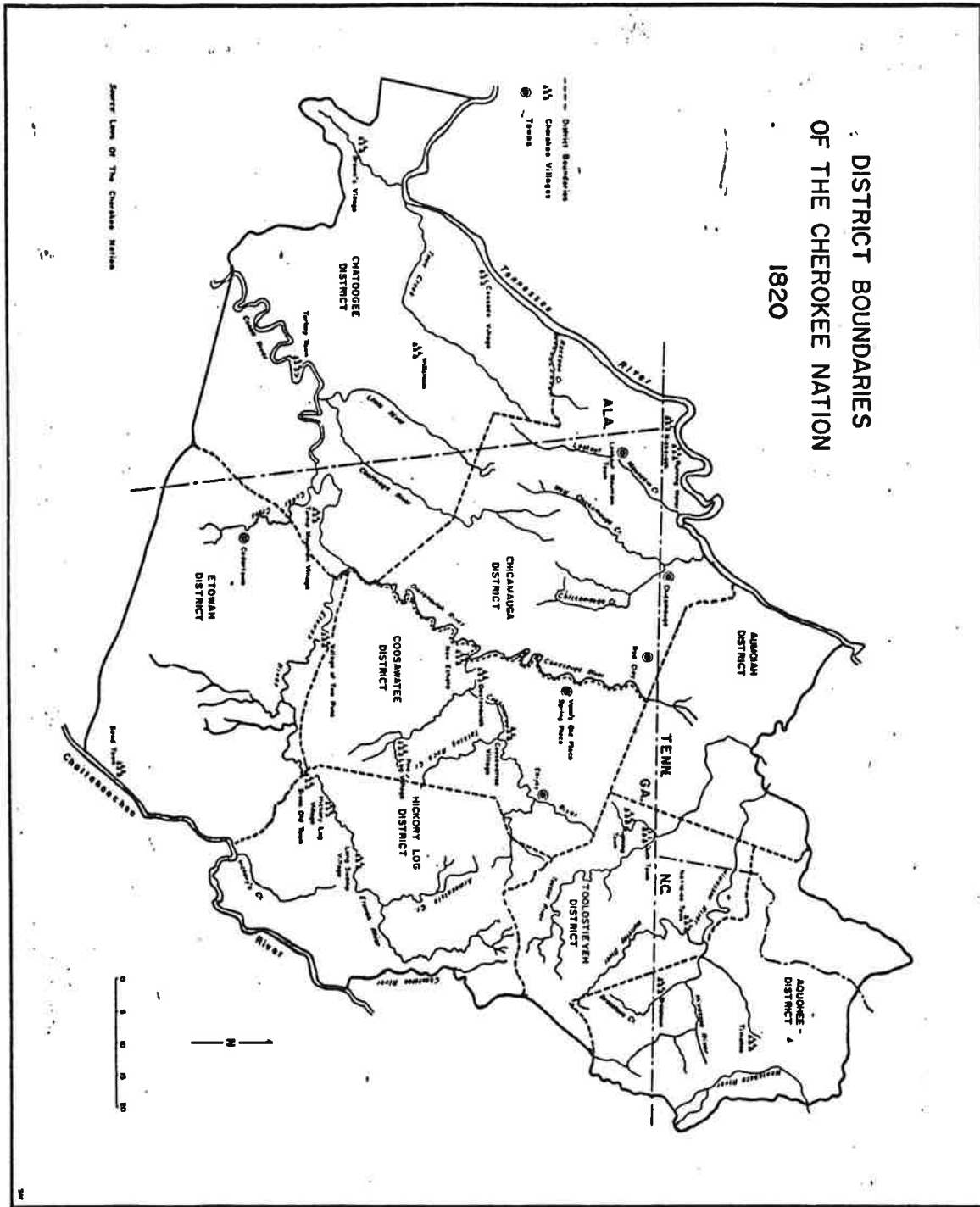


Fig. 1