

## **The Roots of Tennessee**

We say the name "Tennessee" everyday but we never ask "What does that name mean?" or "Where does it come from?" Those answers can be found here in Monroe County! Just outside Vonore, you can find an unassuming memorial which tells a rich history.

This memorial marks the site of Tanasi, the Cherokee village from which the state of Tennessee got its name. The black plaque tells the story as such:

**Tanasi**

**Capital of the Cherokee Nation**

**1721-1730**

**Origin of the Name for the State of Tennessee**

The site of the former town of Tanasi, now underwater, is located about 300 yards west of this marker. Tanasi attained political prominence in 1721 when its civil chief was elected the first "Emperor of the Cherokee Nation". About the same time, the town name was also applied to the river on which it was located. During the mid 18th century, Tansi became overshadowed and eventually absorbed by the adjacent town of Chota, which was to the immediate north. The first recorded spelling of Tennessee as it is today occurred on Henry Timberlake's map of 1762. In 1796, the name Tennessee was selected from among several as most appropriate for the nation's 16th state. Therefore, symbolized by this monument, those who reside in this beautiful state are forever linked to its Cherokee heritage.

In short, the name Tennessee comes from the village Tanasi where the European colonizers met with the Cherokee. It should be noted that Tanasi has many variant spellings including Tanase, Tenasi, Tenassee, and Tunissee. Below is Henry Timberlake's map, featuring Tennessee (spelt with a long S as Tennessee) on the right side of the river.

That plaque and map are not the full story. While the Cherokee are the most famous indigenous people of this region, they were not the first. By the end of the first millennium, there were communities throughout this region, especially in the river valleys. This was during what is called the Mississippian Culture seen across all the land east of the Mississippi River from 800-1600 AD.

In the early 1540s, Hernando de Soto led the first army of conquistadors into this region. Here, he first encountered the Mississippian culture. This was the first wave of colonization as he was followed by other Spanish colonizers including Tristan de Luna and Juan Pardo. When the French and English arrived 150 years later, those river valley communities were gone.

When the Spanish arrived, they brought diseases that the indigenous communities did not have immunity to, resulting in epidemics which killed many of the people. The Yuchi were some of the last people in the region until they were driven out by the Cherokee in the early 1700s. The Yuchi moved south into Georgia. Some theorize that Tanasi was originally Yuchi.

The Cherokee established communities along many of the rivers in the region, including the Hiwassee and Little Tennessee. As they were building their homes, the Europeans came to exploit the land for its resources. The Europeans traded with the Cherokee, but this led to more exploitation and more conflicts, both against Europeans as well as intertribal wars.

(Source: Tennessee Blue Book)