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## **‘Talking stones: Cherokee syllabary in Manitou Cave, Alabama’**

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For the first time, a team of Cherokee scholars and Euro-American archaeologists have recorded and interpreted Cherokee inscriptions in Manitou Cave, Alabama. The inscriptions are in Cherokee syllabary, a system invented by the famed scholar Sequoyah just prior to the Cherokee displacement on the Trail of Tears in the 1830s. There are several signatures of Cherokee ceremonial leaders with the inscriptions, including two by Richard Guess, one of Sequoyah’s own children. These inscriptions reveal evidence for secluded ceremonial activities at a time of crisis for the Cherokee.



[Carroll and Reed in Manitou Cave, with Cherokee syllabary visible on the ceiling.

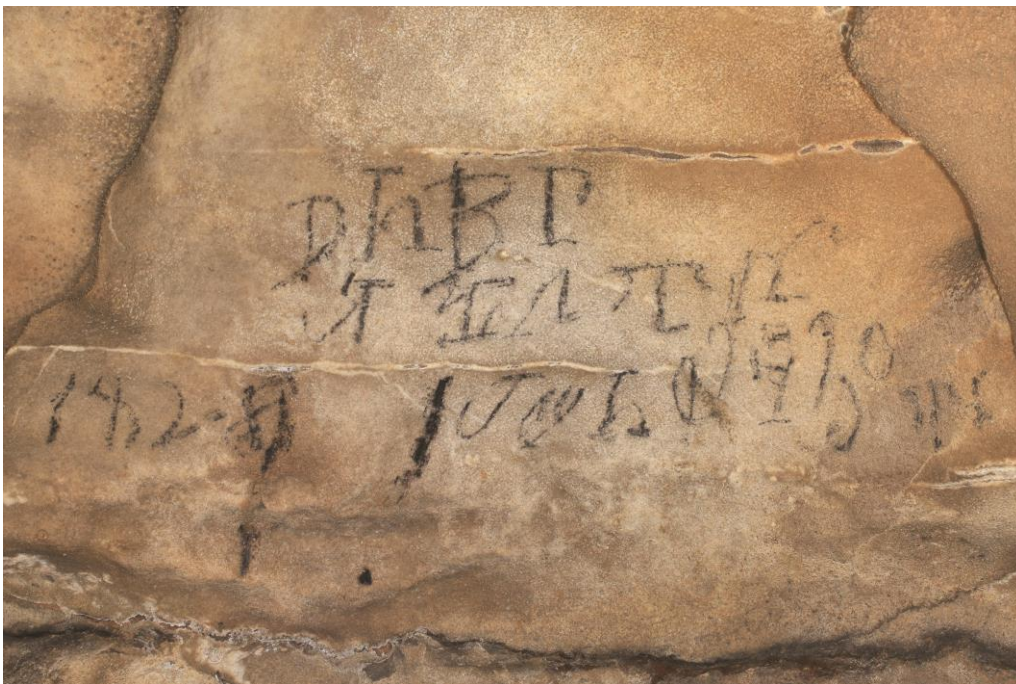
Photograph by A. Cressler]

## Manitou Cave

Manitou Cave is located near an early 19<sup>th</sup> century Cherokee community in Willstown, modern Fort Payne, Alabama. The cave has long been popular with tourists, and until now indigenous uses of the cave have gone unrecorded as later use removed typical archaeological evidence like artefacts or deposits. Manitou Cave is a 1.67km long cavern with a subterranean stream, and by 1888 the cave was opened for tourism, with later interventions in the early-20<sup>th</sup> century to make it more accessible. This obliterated evidence of earlier cave use. The Cherokee inscriptions, however, remain, providing evidence of first-person accounts for how they used and viewed the cave.

### Sequoyah and Cherokee Syllabary

Between 1800 and 1825, Sequoyah invented a Cherokee syllabary while living in Willstown. It was formally adopted by the tribe in 1825 and was used widely, by the time of removal on the Trail of Tears in 1830, most Cherokee were literate. Although the Cherokee were forcibly removed from Alabama, their words on the walls of Manitou Cave endure.



[Cherokee syllabary inscription from 1.5km into Manitou Cave (average vertical element height c. 80mm), photograph by A. Cressler]

### The Inscriptions

Researchers have concentrated on two main groups of Cherokee inscriptions, although further individual or 'stray' syllables exist. Carroll et al. write, "All of these inscriptions in the two areas concern ceremonial and/or spiritual matters; they were probably made in the seclusion of the cave and were not intended for general audiences. With this in mind, we provide only limited translation of inscriptions that contain culturally sensitive material."

## **Stickball**

The first inscription records an important ritual event that took place in 1828, it is translated to mean “the leaders of the stickball team on the 30<sup>th</sup> day in their month April 1828”—‘their’ is taken to mean as the Euro-Americans, who use named months. A nearby inscription reads “we who are those that have blood come out of their nose and mouth”. Stickball was (and is today) the Cherokee version of lacrosse. It is far more than a simple game, it is a ceremonial event that often continues over days, focusing on competition between two communities who, together, “epitomise the spirit and power of the people and their ancestors”. Each team undergoes ritual preparation in private before the game, and access to purifying sacred waters is necessary. This is the event recorded on the walls of Manitou Cave—the ballgame players preparing themselves spiritually for the game and cleansing themselves in the secluded subterranean waters.

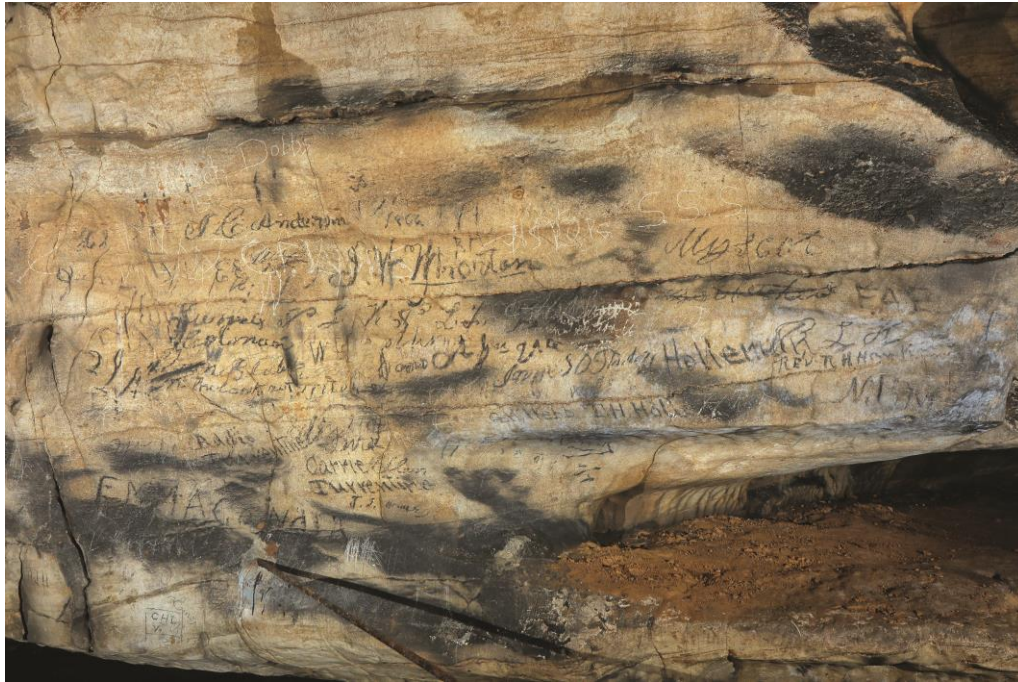
## **The Old Ones**

A second series of inscriptions is located on the ceiling nearer to the entrance of the cave. “All of these ceiling inscriptions relate to sensitive religious subject matters, we will not present their complete translation here; instead we consider their context as much as their content”. The ceiling inscriptions are written backwards, as if addressing readers inside the rock itself—this corresponds with part of one inscription which reads “I am your grandson”. This is how the Cherokee might formally address the “Old Ones” or Cherokee ancestors. “While Old Ones can include deceased Cherokee ancestors, they can also comprise other supernatural beings who inhabited the world before the Cherokee came into existence.” If Manitou Cave was seen as a portal to the spirit world, then words must be written backwards to be legible to the spirit residents.

## **A Spiritually Potent Place**

The inscriptions analysed by Carroll et al. indicate that caves like Manitou were seen by the Cherokee as “spiritually potent places, where wall embellishment was appropriate in the context of ceremonial action”. This is exactly how older cave drawings in the American Southeast have been interpreted, some of which date back thousands of years. Manitou Cave therefore shows a continuity in how caves were seen and used by Southeastern Native American peoples. Furthermore, this research would not have been possible without close collaboration between Euro-American and Cherokee scholars, research which indicates that despite layers of Euro-American signatures which cover the walls near the Cherokee message to the Old Ones, the Cherokee voice in Alabama did in fact outlast the Trail of Tears.





[Euro-American graffiti below ceiling syllabary inscriptions, photograph by A. Cressler]

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ENDS

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