

LESSON PLAN

POTAWATOMI TRAIL OF DEATH

Most of the 39 tribes in Oklahoma are not originally from the state. Almost all of them have a removal story. The most recognized story is The Trail of Tears, which is the story of the Cherokee, Muscogee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Seminole removal. However, few know the story of the Potawatomi. For students to understand modern tribal governments and tribal sovereignty, they must have an idea of how Indigenous people arrived at their current areas.

The Potawatomi Trail of Death is just part of the journey that led to the presence of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation in the state of Oklahoma. The Trail of Death is the story of a band of 859 Potawatomi who were forcibly removed from their northern Indiana homes in September 1838 and marched to a reservation in Kansas over 600 miles away.

Reviewing the following resources will provide greater insight into our removal and provide the teacher the necessary background knowledge to teach this lesson.

- Video: [“Forced From Land And Culture: Removal”](#)
- Encyclopedia Entry: potawatomiheritage.com/encyclopedia/trail-of-death
- Polke Journal: potawatomiheritage.com/chronicling-the-potawatomi-trail-of-death
- Native Knowledge 360 Lesson: americanindian.si.edu/nk360/removal-six-nations/potawatomi/map
- Trail of Death : Letters of Benjamin Marie Petit: potawatomiheritage.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/trailofdeathlett141peti.pdf

LEARNING GOAL/OUTCOME

By the end of this lesson, students will understand the personal and tribal impact of the Trail of Death and be able to empathize with its participants.

STANDARDS

SOCIAL STUDIES

[Oklahoma Academic Standards for Social Studies](#)

8th Grade

8.7 The student will examine the political, economic and social transformations of the Jacksonian Era.

8.7.3 Analyze the impact of Jackson’s policies and decisions concerning American Indian Nations and their tribal sovereignty as a nation’s inherent right to self-govern, including:

- A. non-adherence to federal treaties
- B. disregard for the Worcester v. Georgia decision
- C. forced removal of American Indians

The content standard above is just for example. Oklahoma standards begin addressing “forced removal” as early as 3rd grade.

PREPARATION: BUILDING CONNECTION TO CURRICULUM

Connection to Students and Previous Lessons:

Previous lessons and connections could be a discussion of what students may know about Native American tribes in their area. The conversation perhaps will cover the fact that most of Oklahoma's 39 tribes were removed to Indian Territory from their original homelands.

Guiding Questions for the Teacher:

- What will students ponder?
- What will guide the lesson?
- What do the students already know?
- What are some of their misconceptions?
- What will students be able to discuss without Googling it?
- What is the relevance to the students and teacher?
- What words/terms and how they are used in historical context may need to be addressed?
- What story will this lesson tell?

Introductory Activities to Engage Students:

- Watch video: "[Forced From Land And Culture: Removal](#)"
- Ask students to complete a timeline with significant events.
- Make literacy connections (text and/or literature):
potawatomiheritage.com/encyclopedia/trail-of-death
- Read the Polke Journal: potawatomiheritage.com/chronicling-the-potawatomi-trail-of-death

APPLIED/EXTENDED EXPERIENCE-BUILDING REAL WORLD CONNECTIONS: ACTIVITY:

The Trail of Death was 660 miles. 660 seconds equates to roughly 11 minutes. Students will take an 11-minute walk in silence around their school campuses or outside. As they do so, they will reflect on some prompts. Afterward, students will record their reflections in audio form. Because Potawatomi relied on oral stories as a form of record and communication, this is a way to understand how history could be passed on from a first-person perspective.

The teacher will read entries from the Polke Diary at various points of the walk. You may want to edit these entries for clarity or to make them more age-appropriate. Emphasize details to help make the story come alive. For example, you could quantify elements at each stop by noting the miles traveled each day, total number of sick or deaths, temperature in degrees, etc. Make it a concrete experience.

Preamble to the "Walk":

As we take this walk, think about the situations as if you are Potawatomi. The only remaining records of this time are from outside perspectives, but you will tell the history from your point of view.



Take the time to imagine your current situation. You have been forced from your home with very little notice, and you have only had time to grab a few possessions. Your homes and fields were burned so you would not be able to go back. Your entire community and family are with you. You are being taken somewhere that you have never heard of before and have no idea what it will be like there. There is no internet, no Google maps, no roadmaps or travel guides. There's not even a picture of where you're headed.

Imagine 850 people gathered together with wagons and livestock preparing to leave on a 660-mile journey. Some will ride in wagons, a few will ride horses, and many will walk. Mothers will carry babies, and people of all ages will have to keep up. On this trek, there will be no Quick Stops, McDonald's, public restrooms, or bottled water. Most of the time, you will eat the same thing for every meal for days at a time. You may walk as much as 20 miles in a day. At the end of the day there will be no motels, no beds, and no hot shower. You will sleep on the ground or possibly in a wagon every night, rain or shine, hot or cold. Often you or members of your family will be sick. You will be tired every day.

Possible questions for prompts at each stop:

- What is your environment like? Are there trees, hills, plains etc.?
- How is the environment you are experiencing different from what you knew?
- Is it hot or cold?
- Are you thirsty or hungry?
- How do you feel after walking 10 miles or more?
- How do you feel hearing about the death of a child?
- What is it like to be paraded in front of a whole town of people because they are curious about you?
- What is it like to eat the same thing every day for weeks?

ASSESSMENT:

With knowledge comes great responsibility. Students will record their reflection from a Potawatomi perspective. Because Potawatomi shared history using oral stories, students are now part of that oral history. Each student will record a short audio clip (under three minutes) reflecting on their experience and sharing details with their descendants.

ADDITIONAL IDEAS AND MODIFICATIONS FOR ACTIVITY/LESSON

To tailor a lesson to your students, you may consider the following:

- Add other evaluation steps such as analyzing the remaining historical documents and how they may differ based on perspectives and societal roles.
- Revisit initial ideas and misconceptions. How has your thinking changed?



Contact CPN Department of Education with any questions at college@potawatomi.org or 405-695-6028.