

Furs to FACTORIES

Historical Background

The Tennessee Overhill takes its name from the Overhill Cherokee towns that once sat alongside the rivers in McMinn, Monroe, and Polk counties. Significant Overhill settlements included Chota, Great Tellico, Hiwassee Old Town, Tuskegee, and Tanasi, the last lending its name to the State of Tennessee. They were called “Overhill Towns” because they were situated over the hills from the Cherokee towns in the Carolinas.

The Industrial Revolution took shape in Great Britain in the 1700’s, but it soon spread to the New World. The Overhill played a major role in how the movement played out in the southern Appalachians. During the early 1700’s Cherokee Indians in the southern mountains provided millions of deerskins for the European market, with profits from that venture helping to fuel industrial growth in Great Britain. European money from the fur trade later came back into this part of the mountains through capital investments in early industries like mining, timber, and textiles.

While fur trading was an early economic activity in the Overhill, it was short lived. Subsistence farming was the mainstay for many years, but the vast natural resources of the mountains – timber, minerals, and water - attracted industrialists from all over the world.

Heavy industry arrived in the Overhill by the early 1800’s. Iron works were established in several places. Copper mining began in the Ducktown Basin. Gold was discovered at Coker Creek and textile mills were established in McMinn County. The Unicoi Path was improved and made a toll road. Railroads replaced wagon roads and worker villages sprang up around mills and mines. In 1910 the Ocoee River was tamed for hydroelectric power. Even agriculture changed as new technologies gave rise to mass production. Immigrants came from far and near to labor in the mines and mills, on the railroads, adding their cultural traditions to a complex mix of lifeways.

Today, the Tennessee Overhill includes McMinn, Monroe, and Polk counties with much of the land lying within the southern half of the Cherokee National Forest. The region encompasses fertile farmland, wild river gorges, rugged mountains, small towns, and crossroads communities. Historic sites and museums tell the stories of Cherokees, European explorers, fur traders, miners, mill workers, railroaders, and farmers – the ordinary people who came here to work, make homes and create communities. Old company towns and mill villages, abandoned mines and flumes, roads and railroads, and long-silent machinery all speak of this extraordinary time in our nation’s history.

The Furs to Factories Trail leads modern day explorers to places where this story played out. Chronologically, the trail (and story) begins with the fur trade, but feel free to start your tour at any point and visit the sites and topics of most interest to you. The inquisitive visitor will be rewarded.