

The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma

(Oklahoma Social Studies Standards, OSDE)

Tribe: The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma

Tribal websites: www.choctawnation.com



1. Migration/movement/forced removal

Oklahoma History C3 Standard 2.3 *“Integrate visual and textual evidence to explain the reasons for and trace the migrations of Native American peoples including the Five Tribes into present-day Oklahoma, the Indian Removal Act of 1830, and tribal resistance to the forced relocations.”*

Choctaw Origins

The Choctaw homeland comprises present-day western Alabama, eastern Mississippi, and the Florida panhandle. The Tribe’s presence in this area is explained through two ancient stories handed down from generation to generation. The first story tells of Choctaw people being created underground, along with other southeastern tribes including the Chickasaw, Cherokee, and Muscogee “Creek”. After the other Tribes emerged onto the surface of the earth through a cave and moved to different regions, the Choctaw people emerged and were told by the creator that they were to stay in that area, which would become the Choctaw homeland. Nearby, the Choctaw built Nvnih Waiya, the first Choctaw village.

The second origins story tells of the journey of two brothers, Chahta and Chikasha and their people. According to this story, God (Hvshtahli) instructed a holy man to stick a sacred pole upright in the ground, and in the morning, the pole would lean in the direction that God wanted the people to travel to find a new homeland. Every morning for months or according to some versions of the story for many years, the pole leaned towards the southeast and the people daily walked in that direction. Finally, one morning near Nvnih Waiya Creek, the pole appeared to be standing straight and the Choctaw people knew that they had reached their home. Near the end of their journey, the two brothers argued, and as a result Chikasha and his less numerous supporters separated from the main body of the people. Chahta and his people became known as the Choctaw Tribe while Chikasha and his people became known as the Chickasaw Tribe.

To Choctaw people, these two stories, though different, are not contradictory. It may be that they describe once separate groups of people that joined together to make up today’s Choctaw people.

Indian Removal Act of 1830

Many years later, most Choctaw people were removed from the homeland to what is now southeastern Oklahoma. This came about as a result of the Indian Removal Act, made into law on May 28, 1830. Created by President Andrew Jackson, the Indian Removal Act called for all Tribes east of the Mississippi River to be removed west of the Mississippi River to Indian Territory. After years of signing treaties that slowly eroded away their land base, in September of 1830, the Choctaw people again assembled with representatives of the United States at Dancing Rabbit Creek in Noxubee County, Mississippi to negotiate a treaty. At the meeting, the US representatives threatened the unprovoked destruction of the Choctaw people, if Tribal representatives would not sign a final Treaty, ceding the last of Choctaw lands east of the Mississippi River to the United States. The treaty, did allow for Choctaws wishing to remain in Mississippi to do so with dual citizenship. After much resistance, the Choctaws signed the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek on September 27, 1830.

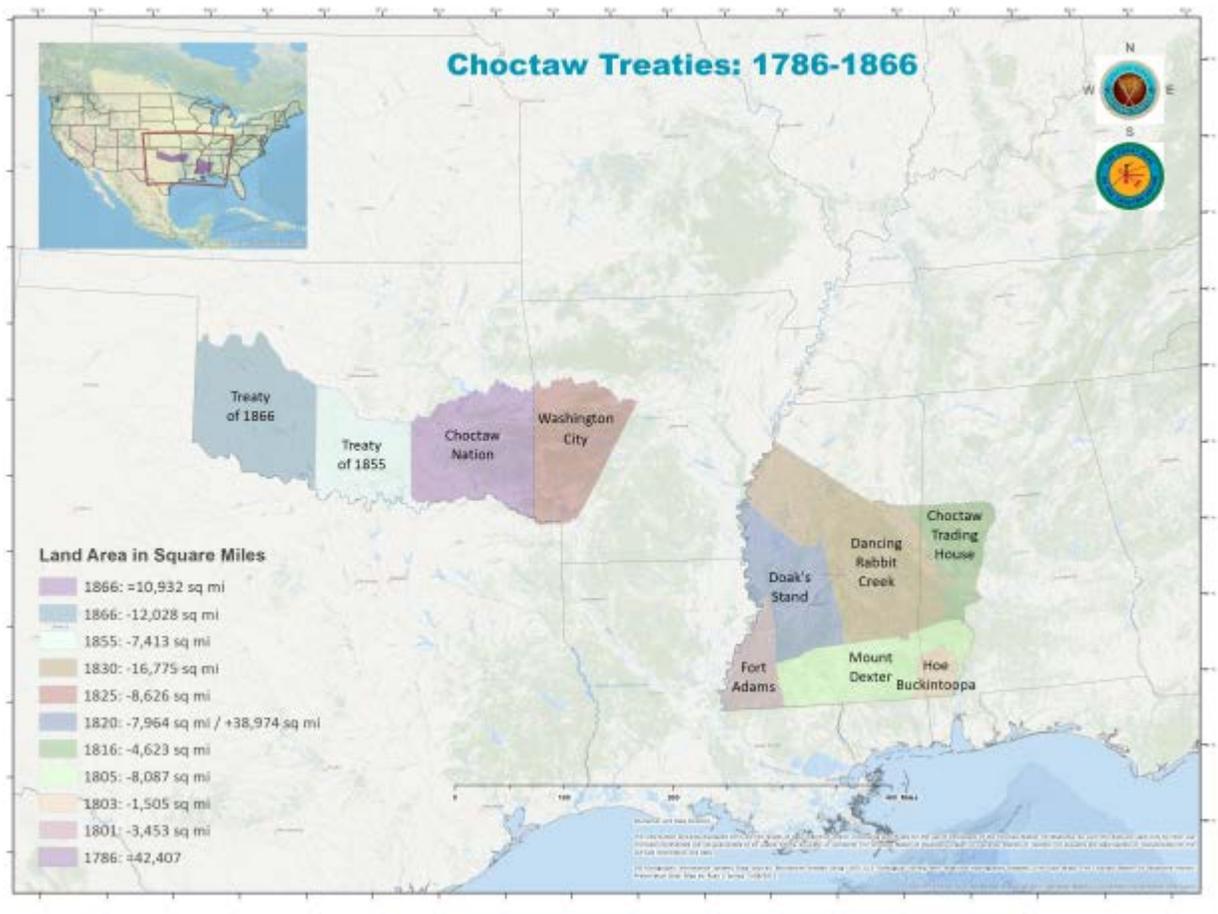
Removal

Removal happened in three waves, 1831-1833, 1845-1854, and 1902-1903. The years of removal are a tragic period in Choctaw history. Roughly 20,000 Choctaws were forced to leave their homes in Mississippi. Choctaw emigrants in the 1830s, faced some of the worst winters in recorded history. Government provisions, called for by treaty were often inadequate or simply non-existent. With the lack of shelter and clothing, death became rampant, and the journey was named “The Trail of Tears”. It is estimated that more than 2,500 Choctaw men, women, and children, died on their journey to Oklahoma in the 1830s. The descendants of those who survived the trip are today’s Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.

Despite every effort from the United States government, some Choctaws steadfastly remained in the homeland. Although land allotments had been promised to them in the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, most allotments were never provided. Choctaws became sharecroppers in their own land. Descendants of the Choctaw people who stayed in Mississippi make up today’s Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians. Members of the Jena Band of Choctaw Indians are descended from Choctaw people who remained in Louisiana.

2. Maps

Oklahoma History C3 Standard 2.3 “Integrate visual and textual evidence to explain the reasons for and trace the migrations of Native American peoples including the Five Tribes into present-day Oklahoma, the Indian Removal Act of 1830, and tribal resistance to the forced relocations.”



Rebuilding

After reaching Indian Territory, the Choctaws set about to regain some sense of order out of the chaos they had endured. A new constitution was written, one that mirrored that of the United States, and a national court system was developed. The Choctaw capital was set in Tushkahoma. The Choctaws also established their own form of law enforcement called the Lighthorse. In 1866, Choctaw Chief Allen Wright named the new land "Oklahoma", a term that means "Red People" in the Choctaw language.

Oklahoma History C3 Standard 2.7 *“Compare and contrast multiple points of view to evaluate the impact of the Dawes Act which resulted in the loss of tribal communal lands and the redistribution of lands by various means including land runs as typified by the Unassigned Lands and the Cherokee Outlet, lotteries, and tribal allotments.”*

The Dawes of 1887 once again set out to break up the communally held lands of the Choctaws. Eventually each Choctaw was enrolled on the Dawes Rolls and issued an allotment of land. The Dawes Rolls are still used in deciding tribal membership today.

3. Population Past/Present

Today, the citizenship of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma is comprised of people who are directly descended from Choctaw individuals on the Dawes Roll. With a membership of over 200,000 the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma is today the third largest Tribe in the country.

4. Government; Chiefs vs Chairman; Elected or Paternal

US Government C3 Standard 3.4 *“Summarize and explain the relationships and the responsibilities between national and state governments including tribal and local governments.*

Public Law 91-495 authorized the Choctaws in 1970 to select their own officers through popular election, and the Choctaw Constitution was adopted in 1983, reviving their 1860 Constitution with updated modifications. The tribal nation is guided by an elected 12-member council with a chief. As a “domestic dependent sovereign”, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma operates on lands reserved for their exclusive use and supports policing, judicial, educational, and health branches which maintain services for their citizens.

Oklahoma History C3 Standard *“The student will analyze the formation and development of constitutional government in Oklahoma. 1) Compare and contrast the development of governments among the Native American tribes, the movement for the state of Sequoyah . . . 2) Describe and summarize attempts to create a state constitution joining Indian and Oklahoma Territories including the impact of the Progressive and Labor Movements resulting in statehood on November 16, 1907.”*

The Choctaw Nation government consists of an elected Chief, Assistant Chief, and a 12 member Tribal Council. Each member of the Tribal Council represents a district of the 10 ½ counties of the Choctaw Nation. Gary Batton is the current chief of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma with Jack Austin, Jr. serving as assistant chief.

5. Language Group

Oklahoma History C3 Standard 4.1 *“Compare and contrast the successes and failures of the United States policy of assimilation of the Native Americans in Oklahoma including the passage of the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 and the effects of the Indian Boarding Schools (1880s-1940s) upon Native Americans’ identity, culture, traditions, and tribal government and sovereignty.”*

The Choctaw language is considered a part of the western Muskogean language group, and is closely related to the language spoken by the Chickasaw Tribe.

The last 30 years has seen a resurgence in efforts to preserve and strengthen the Choctaw Nation’s culture and heritage. Language programs to learn Choctaw are provided from elementary school through college as well as on-line programs for adults. Historical games like stickball and traditional native dances are taught to the young. A registry of Choctaw artists who have preserved traditional skills like beadwork, making baskets, gourds and pipes and wood sculptures, to list a few, is maintained by the tribe.

The Choctaw Nation now has language classes available on the Internet and are continuing to expand those classes to meet the needs of those who are interested in enrolling. In addition to learning how to read and write in the native language the students are also learning about the history and culture of the tribe through the classes.

Distance learning through One-Net is now in approximately 32 high schools within the Choctaw Nation jurisdiction and in five colleges including Carl Albert Jr. College at Poteau and Eastern Oklahoma State College at Wilburton. The program is also being taught at Southeastern Oklahoma State University in Durant and in community classes in various locations in Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and California.

The Chahta Anumpa Aikhvna (Choctaw Language School) was established to promote and preserve the language, history and culture of the Choctaw people. The School currently employs twenty-four people. At the present time, there are fifteen Language instructors. These Language instructors have developed Choctaw Language Curriculum I & II which is taught to the public schools and colleges. The Choctaw Language is also taught through distance learning to 14 Head Start Centers. Language classes are also taught in the communities throughout the Choctaw Nation’s 10 ½ counties and there are a few taught outside of the Nation. The School of Choctaw Language has developed and published a definer, a history book, a social history book, five children’s books, a Choctaw Christmas CD, a traditional hymns CD, and Choctaw I and Choctaw II textbook with curriculum for the students..

6. Cultural Identifiers – i.e. Mound Builders; Plains

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Traditional Lifeways

Ancestral Choctaw societies grew, developed, and changed over thousands of years. 300 years ago, the social structure of the Choctaw people was made up of clans within a matriarchal society. Within Choctaw society, women were seen as the givers of life and were treated with great respect.

Choctaw men were responsible for hunting, protecting the community, interacting with other groups, serving as orators/historians, and playing stickball.

Stickball was an important part of Choctaw culture, serving as a way of settling disputes within the communities and between tribes. It also created an opportunity for men to stay in top shape and sharpen their skills. Players went through rigorous mental and physical preparations including fasting, dancing, meditating and rubbing their bodies with traditional medicines. Choctaw spiritual leaders provided guidance from the field and sidelines. Spectators, especially the women, actively supported their team and celebrated the game by dancing, singing, feasting, drinking, cheering, and gambling. Many Choctaw communities still play stickball today.

Spirituality among the Choctaws has traditionally been very personal in nature and has differed among communities and families. In Choctaw society 300 years ago, a variety of spiritually significant dances were held throughout the year. The biggest celebration and most important spiritual event was the Green Corn Ceremony. This ceremony was held when the corn began to ripen and was a time of forgiveness, purification, and renewal.

Choctaw communities have been prolific agriculturalists for centuries, producing large quantities of corn, beans, and squash, sunflowers, lamb’s quarter and other crops long before European arrival. Traditionally, women were the agricultural producers of the tribe while the men were the hunters. The Choctaw traditionally lived their lives in a pattern that followed the seasons.



Christianity

Choctaw people were exposed to Catholicism in the 1500 by the Spanish, and again in the 1700s by the French, however few Choctaws were converted to Christianity. Mushulatubbe, who served as Chief of one of the three Choctaw Districts during the early 1800s, lived a traditional life, but also saw value in western education. In 1818, he invited the Protestants missionaries to come to Mississippi and set up western schools for Choctaw youth.

Cyrus Byington a Presbyterian missionary went to the Choctaws in Mississippi in 1821 and lived with the Choctaw people for 45 years. When Byington arrived among the Choctaws, the Choctaw language was unwritten. With help from Choctaw people, he created a Choctaw language dictionary, while he and other missionaries began to translate portions of the Bible and several hymns into Choctaw.

Upon arrival on the “Trail of Tears”, more denominations were established in Choctaw communities in Oklahoma, with Methodist and Baptist churches becoming quite common.

Today, there are many denominations and non-denominations in Choctaw country. Some congregations are part of larger denominations, but maintain their Choctaw identity, singing and praying in the Choctaw language. Today there are approximately 20 Choctaw Presbyterian congregations, 15 Choctaw Baptist congregations, and several dozen Choctaw Methodist congregations in Oklahoma Choctaw country.

7. Fine arts

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As an Indigenous group, Choctaw people have always produced functional art from natural materials in their environment. Basketry, made of split river cane was made by Choctaw ancestors at least 7,000 years ago. Cane baskets are still made by Choctaw people today in a variety of forms and colors.

Clay pottery has been made in the Choctaw homeland for at least 3,000 years. Native clay is dug from the ground and mixed with sand, burned mussel shell, or other materials to keep it from cracking. After the pottery is made, it is dried and then heated red-hot in a bonfire. Thereafter, it is water-proof and can be used for cooking, serving food, or a variety of other tasks.

For 1,000 years, Choctaw men have made and used bows and arrows. Bows are traditionally as tall as the archer, and made from hardwoods like hickory or bois d’ark. Strings are made from twisted strips of animal hide or tendons. Arrows are made from river cane, or saplings. Points are traditionally made from stone, antler, or gar fish scales.

Today, Choctaw people enjoy doing the social dance. These dances honor different animals, or are used for certain purposes, such as a chance for young men and women to meet and interact.

8. Significant events (ie. Massacres, Battles, Supreme Court cases...)

Oklahoma History C3 Standard 2.4C *“Summarize the impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction Treaties on Native American peoples, territories, and tribal sovereignty including the a) Required enrollment of the Freedmen, b) Second Indian Removal and the role of the Buffalo Soldiers, c) Significance of the Massacre at the Washita, d) Reasons for the reservation system, and e) Establishment of the western military posts of Fort Sill, Fort Supply, and Fort Reno.”*

From the very beginning, Choctaw communities have changed and adapted to changing Circumstances around them. During the last Ice Age (13,000 years ago), skilled Choctaw ancestors hunted giant animals like woolly mammoth with stone-tipped spears. As early as 7,000 years ago, Choctaw communities began to make monumental architecture in the form of earth mounds. Choctaws began utilizing agriculture around

1,500 years ago. By AD 1200, Moundville a settlement on the eastern edge of the Choctaw homeland, was the second largest city in what is now the United States.

The arrival of Europeans in the Choctaw homeland brought many new opportunities but also hardship, suffering and death. European diseases were first brought to the region by ship-wrecked Spanish sailors in the 1520s, and soon took the lives of half of the Native people living in some of the communities in the area (Cabeza de Vaca 1905:34-35, 64 [1542]).

In 1540, an army of Spanish Conquistadors invaded the Choctaw homeland. At the battle of Mabila, ancestral Choctaw warriors met and crippled this army, at the cost of thousands of lives. Although Choctaw communities had little direct contact with Europeans in the 1600s, European diseases continued to rage through the Choctaw homeland, taking thousands more lives. Slave raids sponsored by England's Carolina Colony, became an increasing threat, claiming hundreds of Choctaw lives by the close of the century.

In the wake of unprecedented population loss and turmoil, one strategy successfully used by Choctaw communities was to more closely confederate with each other, and to adopt survivors from smaller local Tribes. These included the Chatot, Ibitoupa, Choula, Mobile, Okelousa, Pensacola, Tohome, and Chakchiuma (Swanton 1946:107, 108, 140, 151, 167, 173, 197).

French ships landed on the Gulf coast immediately south of Choctaw lands in 1699. By 1702, the French created the town of Mobile, adjacent to Choctaw lands on the Mobile Bay. The Choctaw became an ally and trading partner of France, providing military protection, food, and deer hides to the settlement in exchange for guns and other objects manufactured in Europe.

In 1763, the French lost their territory west of the Mississippi after their defeat in the Seven Years War. Spain then took possession of this land and encouraged the Choctaw to move into Louisiana. Leaving their traditional homelands in western Alabama and Mississippi, some Choctaw families began to settle in Louisiana. The Choctaws who stayed within Mississippi and Alabama were left under British authority. Under the English colonial system, trade and market values, and hard bargaining defined the Choctaw relationship, as opposed to the French system of gifts, generosity, and reciprocity (White 1983:71).

The establishment of the United States created additional challenges for the Choctaw people. The Choctaw homeland, with thousands of years of improvements made to the land by Native people, was highly desired among the American settlers as they began moving farther into the southeast. This encroachment by the Americans caused a great deal of tension and conflict for the Choctaw people.

The Choctaws began relations with the United States during the Revolutionary War. In 1786, the United States began a series of treaties that would eventually devoid the land base of the Choctaw people, beginning with the Treaty of Hopewell.

Between 1803 and 1830, the Choctaws signed 7 treaties with the United States. These treaties included the Treaty of Fort Adams, the Treaty of Hoe Buckintoopa, the Treaty of Mount Dexter, the Treaty of Fort Stephens, the Treaty of Doak's Stand, and the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek. Each of these treaties reduced the among of land that belong to the Choctaws in exchange for provisions, money, and eventually a new home west of the Mississippi River.

9. Current Information on tribe

During the 1970's the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, like many other Tribes during that time, began reasserting its sovereign rights as a Tribal Nation. In 1983 the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma passed a new constitution. This act led the way for the services, state of the art facilities, and economic development that the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma is enjoying today.



10. Other information (ie. Elder testimonials; Guest speakers; Literature; Famous Tribal members...)

Chief Pushmataha – The Chief’s name comes from the phrase “apushi mvt taha”, and means “boyhood is left behind”. When asked about his early life, Pushmataha said that one day lightning struck a tree and he emerged from the smoke as a grown man. As a youth, Pushmataha was known for his wit, and skill on the battlefield. He became Chief of the Choctaw Oklahannali District in 1800. Commissioned as a Brigadier General in the United States Army, Pushmataha led Choctaw forces in aid of Andrew Jackson in the Creek War. Pushmataha, widely known for his speaking ability and intelligence was the most influential Choctaw leader of his time. He died in 1894 on a visit to Washington D.C.

Chief Gregory E. Pyle – Greg Pyle was born in Fort Bragg, California in 1940. He graduated from Hugo High School in 1967, and graduated from Southeastern Oklahoma State in 1972. In 1997, after serving as Assistance Chief of the Choctaw Nation for 14 years, Pyle became Chief of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. As Chief, Pyle worked to bring financial prosperity to the Tribe, with Choctaw Nation eventually becoming the largest employer in southeastern Oklahoma. Tribal finances were used to construct the Talihina Indian Hospital, to create college scholarship programs for Tribal youth, to build community centers, and to create a variety of other programs to aid Tribal members and others living in Choctaw country. In April 2014, Chief Pyle retired from office after 17 years of service.