

THE CHICKASAW NATION DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE AND HUMANITIES

Through Our Own Eyes: A Chickasaw Perspective on Removal

Student Reference Material

We were a fierce, war-like tribe that originally resided in what is now northern Mississippi, northwestern Alabama, western Tennessee and western Kentucky. Many of our largest settlements were located near the cities of Tupelo, Miss.; Huntsville, Ala.; and Memphis, Tenn. Because of our skill in warfare, we were sometimes called the "Spartans of the lower Mississippi Valley." We even raised our male children much like the Spartans, teaching them military skills and acclimating them to pain and hardship at an early age.¹ The training must have been effective, as historical observers of our tribe often commented on our bravery and courage. A French governor of Louisiana once wrote that Chickasaws "breathe nothing but war and are unquestionably the bravest of the continent."²



Figure 1: Map of Chickasaw Homelands as outlined in the Treaty of Hopewell 1786

In the early days of colonial America, we formed an alliance with the English. This meant that we frequently battled the French, a long-time English enemy. In fact, some historians credit Chickasaws for the United States being an English-speaking country. This is because we

¹ Greg O'Brien, "Chickasaws: The Unconquerable People," *American Indian History*, accessed September 5, 2013, <http://mshistorynow.mdah.state.ms.us/articles/8/chickasaws-the-unconquerable-people>.

² Stephen R. Cook, "The Decades and the Villages: 1720-1730," *Historical Overview*, accessed September 12, 2013, http://www.thechickasawvillages.com/decades1720_1730.html.

delivered the French a crushing defeat at the Battle of Ackia in 1736, which took place in modern-day Tupelo, Miss.³ Almost 50 years after the Battle of Ackia, the Americans defeated the British in the Revolutionary War, and the American frontier quickly opened up as the newly independent country supported westward expansion. Hostility soon developed between the whites settling the frontier country and the tribes already there, such as ours. The thirst for land ultimately became too great, though, and Congress passed the Indian Removal Act in 1830, which would exile Chickasaws and many other tribes from their native homelands.

The Indian Removal Act authorized President Andrew Jackson to grant Native American tribes land west of the Mississippi River in exchange for their traditional homelands. The legislation was designed to open up vast tracts of rich, fertile land to settlers who had begun pouring into what was then the American southwest frontier in the 1820s, seeking fertile, productive land.⁴ Because Native American tribes often possessed some of the best farmland, settlers quickly began calling for the removal of the Native American tribes. Politicians listened to the demands of their white constituents and passed the Indian Removal Act, initiating a tragic period of American history.

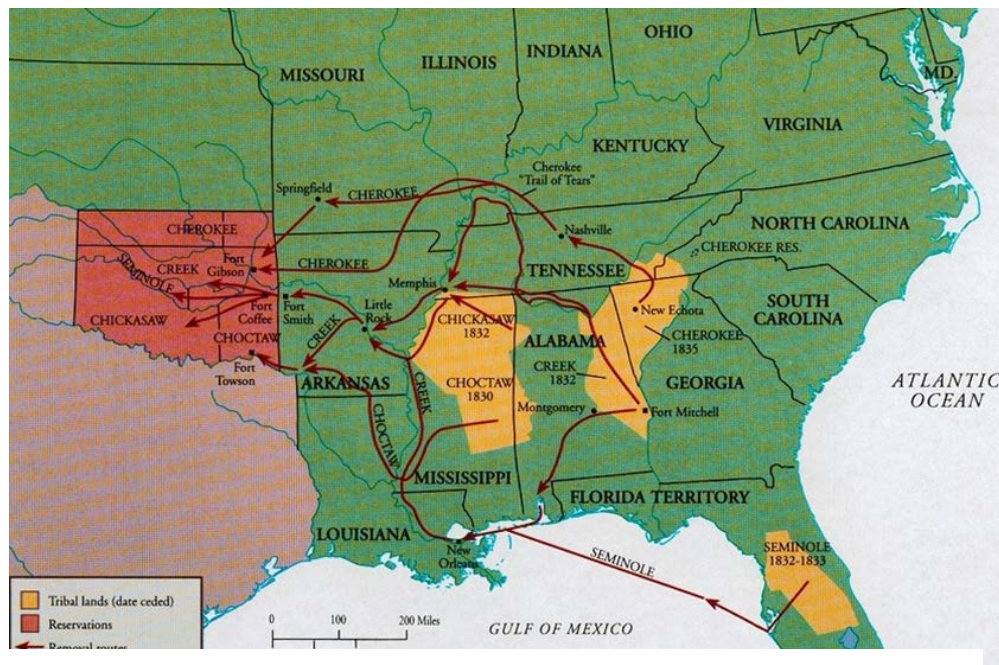


Figure 2: Map of Removal Routes of Five Civilized Tribes

³ “Our History,” Chickasaw Nation Culture, History, and the Arts, accessed September 5, 2013, http://www.chickasaw.net/history_culture/index_670.htm.

⁴ Donna L. Akers, “Removing the Heart of the Choctaw People: Indian Removal from a Native Perspective,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 23, no. 3 (1999): 66.

Those principally affected were the tribes that are now called the Five Civilized Tribes, who inhabited the southeastern United States. These tribes include the Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, Muscogee Creeks and Seminoles. Jackson sent government agents to the tribes to negotiate treaties for their land, and many of these negotiations proved scandalous. Furthermore, once the treaties were signed, removal was supposedly voluntary. And in certain cases, it actually was. In most cases, though, the tribes were forced to leave behind their land, homes, possessions and ancestors, often marching at bayonet point through the frigid cold and snow.

Of all the Five Civilized Tribes, we had arguably the most unique removal. It took us 13 years to complete the removal, and we paid for it with our own funds. Additionally, unlike tribes such as the Cherokees, what forced our removal was not military intervention, but a lack of it.

In 1829, the State of Mississippi extended its laws over us and outlawed our government and its functions.⁵ The State of Alabama soon followed Mississippi, passing similar laws. These laws abolished our sovereignty, or right to govern ourselves. This was in violation of former treaties,⁶ and we were fearful that we would not be treated as equals with the whites. Our leaders appealed to the U.S. to enforce our treaty rights. Stating their concerns in a letter to Pres. Jackson, our leaders wrote, "...the laws of these states are written in more than a hundred big books we cannot read, we cannot understand them and altho we love our white brethren, we cannot see in the extention [*sic*] of state laws anything but injustice and suppression..."⁷ The U.S. government refused to act, seizing the opportunity to pressure us into moving west.

Another precursor of removal was white settlement. Our homelands formed an important link between the northeast and the lower Mississippi Valley and Gulf.⁸ Interconnecting road networks like the Natchez Trace had emerged throughout our lands. These roadways exposed whites to our people and our land, which led to increased settlement and development. Moreover, the problem of whites settling on our lands became particularly serious after Mississippi and Alabama extended their laws over us.⁹ Frequent disputes came with these settlers, who built illegal homesteads, grazed their livestock on our land, traded in our territory

⁵ Amanda L. Paige, Fuller L. Bumpers, Daniel F. Littlefield Jr., *Chickasaw Removal* (Ada, OK: Chickasaw Press, 2010), 19.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁸ Arrell Gibson, *The Chickasaws* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 131.

⁹ Paige, Bumpers, and Littlefield, *Chickasaw Removal*, 18.

without permits and stole our horses, cattle and slaves.¹⁰ These actions also violated multiple treaties signed between the U.S. government and tribal leaders.¹¹ We again appealed to the U.S. government to honor the promises it had made. The government chose not to intervene.

Our backs were against the wall. The federal government refused to drive off the settlers that were unlawfully squatting on our land. We could choose to put up with this and stay in Mississippi and Alabama, but have to stay under the authority of the states' laws. Even facing all this, some high-ranking Chickasaws did not want to leave. At a council in 1826, our principal leader Levi Colbert and our other leaders told government agents that they feared transplanting our people would be like "transplanting an old tree, which would wither and die away." Despite these sentiments, we finally relented and entered into negotiations to move west.

We reluctantly agreed to removal and signed the Treaty of Pontotoc in 1832. This treaty meeting was not without its scandals, though. A treaty was drafted after the U.S. treaty commissioner, John Coffee, ordered a group of whites that were advising us to leave.¹² We did not fully understand this treaty and refused to sign it. Additionally, Coffee withheld an annuities payment due to us through treaty obligations, and he would not release the annuities until we signed the treaty.¹³ This caused some of our leaders to sign the document, while others simply left. The following day, Coffee brought another treaty to us. He stated that our principal leader Levi Colbert, who was sick and absent from the treaty party, had read the treaty and agreed to its terms. Our remaining leaders signed it, only to learn that Levi Colbert claimed that he neither read nor signed the treaty.¹⁴

One can only imagine the trauma that beset us at this time, knowing that we were to be exiled from the land we believed was given to us by God, whom we called Abaabinni'li'. In our migration legend, a seminal story in Chickasaw culture and identity, we settled the lower Mississippi Valley after receiving a divine sign that it was our promised land. Many of our people sank into despair and turned to alcohol once they heard we would be removed from this

¹⁰ Ibid., 18.

¹¹ See the Treaty of Hopewell, 1786 and the Treaty of 1816, Charles J. Kappler, ed., *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties*, vol. 2, *Treaties* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1904), 15 and 137, accessed September 5, 2013, <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/kappler/Vol2/toc.htm>.

¹² Paige, Bumpers, and Littlefield, *Chickasaw Removal*, 38.

¹³ Gibson, *The Chickasaws*, 159.

¹⁴ Paige, Bumpers, and Littlefield, *Chickasaw Removal*, 39.

land.¹⁵ Thomas Stuart, a missionary, commented on the state of the Chickasaws at that time: "The Church is suffering dreadfully from the intense anxiety which all feel for [the Chickasaws]...worldliness...generally prevails [among them], and some, we fear, have been permitted to draw back to perdition. We have never felt so entirely discouraged."¹⁶

Nevertheless, there were a few redeeming qualities of the Treaty of Pontotoc. It called for our lands east of the Mississippi River to be parceled out among individual families and then sold just before removal. The proceeds from the sales would go into a fund that would pay for transportation and food while removing west. Unfortunately for us, the federal government oversaw and controlled the expenditures of this fund. The fund was severely mismanaged and rapidly depleted, so much so that the federal government ordered an investigation into the issue. The fund still provided significant advantages. It allowed virtually all of us to move west with many of our possessions and at our own pace.

Our first main party was removed in the spring and summer of 1837. The only major problems on this trip were the occasional muddy road, impassible swamp and horse-thievery. The second contingent was removed in the fall and winter of 1837. In a letter to a friend, a young girl described our departure from Mississippi, writing, "...our village presents a different appearance. The Indians are all gone; it was melancholy to see the poor creatures leaving the land of their birth and the graves of their fathers. A deep sadness was imprinted on their countenances."¹⁷ It likely was a bleak sight once the second removal party left. In all, roughly 4,000 people made the move in the fall and winter of 1837.¹⁸

Once the second removal party reached Memphis, some of us chose to take steamboats to our destinations, while others chose the overland route. An observer described the image of the overland party just before it crossed the Mississippi River:

"I do not think that I have ever been a witness of so remarkable a scene...this immense column of moving Indians, several thousand, with the train of Govt wagons, the multitude of horses...the men in complete Indian dress with showy shawls tied in turban fashion round their heads — dashing about on their horses, like Arabs, many of them presenting the finest countenances & figures that I ever saw...The young women have

¹⁵ Gibson, *The Chickasaws*, 141.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁷ Paige, Bumpers, and Littlefield, *Chickasaw Removal*, 147.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.

remarkably mild & soft countenances & are singularly decorous in their dress & comportment."¹⁹

Similar to the first removal party, the second party suffered few mishaps. This is not to say that the removals were without tragedy. During the first removal, a 14-year-old girl fell off a steamboat and drowned before anyone could help her. Tishominko, one of our most revered leaders, also died while en route to Indian Territory. In all, our removal took 13 years. The primary removal consisted of the first two parties, and small groups of us continued to filter into Indian Territory until 1850. These removals were not easy, but they did go significantly better than the removals of other tribes. Settling in Indian Territory, however, would prove to be a difficult task.

Food shortages were a major problem once we arrived in the Territory. The U.S. government used our funds to purchase rations for removal and for the first year of settlement. The government expected our entire people to remove in the spring of 1837 and bought far too many rations too soon.²⁰ Furthermore, the government lacked sufficient storage space at Fort Coffee, the depot where most of the rations were sent. The government attempted to build storage, but while doing so, barrels of pork, flour, and corn sat and soured in the hot summer sun. Slone Love, a prominent Chickasaw mixed-blood, remarked that "the pork was so bad that Doctor Walker told me that, if the emigrants continued to use it, it would kill them all off. It gave those who eat it a diarrhea, and it was always my opinion that many poor people died in consequence of it."²¹ One witness even attested to seeing some of our Chickasaw women flock to an area where horses had been fed the night before, searching for the remaining corn kernels.²²

The residents of Boggy Depot, a Chickasaw settlement in Indian Territory, suffered severely at the hands of government and contractor blunders. In the spring of 1838, Boggy Depot received already-spoiled rations from Fort Coffee. The government also purchased rations from local contractors, but the contractors failed to deliver them on time. The government agent in charge of disbursing rations at Boggy Depot wrote to his superior, "I am here starving with the Chickasaws, by gross mismanagement on the part of the contractors; and when our situation will

¹⁹ Ibid., 125.

²⁰ Ibid., 72-73.

²¹ Ibid., 174.

²² Gibson, *The Chickasaws*, 178.

be bettered is hard for me to say, for it is one failure after another without end....I begin to think that we shall have to starve to death or abandon the country.”²³

The conditions of our other settlements were hardly better. In the fall of 1838, a number of us in the settlement of Brushy Creek wrote to the government of their starvation, requesting additional rations.²⁴ In a similar letter, a government agent serving us wrote to Washington, stating, "The situation of the Chickasaws required immediate action to save them from starvation; I saw myself their distress...there is neither cattle or hogs in the country...without either corn or beef, they must starve."²⁵

Our leaders repeatedly notified government administrators about the rations issue, as well as other wrongs that occurred in connection with our removal. The government sent Major Ethan Allen Hitchcock to investigate these complaints. Hitchcock found that contractors regularly delivered less food than agreed upon. In fact, in one instance, contractors delivered a herd of cattle, and an on-the-spot verification showed that the contractors overestimated the cattle's weight by one-third.²⁶ Contractors also sold us \$200,000 in spoiled rations, and they charged us a total of \$700,000 for rations that were never delivered. In addition, the contractors were paid more than twice as much per ration as the contractors for the removal of previous tribes. It was also discovered that the steamboat operator that had transported some of us from Memphis overcharged us for luggage and charged us for the transportation even though we took the overland route.²⁷

It was clear to Hitchcock that government officials were in collusion with the contractors, although no formal charges ever arose.²⁸ Major Hitchcock wrote a report on his findings and delivered it to the War Department Secretary, who was then in charge of Indian Affairs. The report was lost in the War Department files.²⁹ We eventually received modest compensation for

²³ Paige, Bumpers, and Littlefield, *Chickasaw Removal*, 180.

²⁴ Grant Foreman, *Indian Removal*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), 225.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 225.

²⁶ Gibson, *The Chickasaws*, 178.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 181.

²⁸ Paige, Bumpers, and Littlefield, *Chickasaw Removal*, 210 & 212.

²⁹ Gibson, *The Chickasaws*, 182.

the fraudulent actions of the contractors and government agents, though this came almost 50 years later.³⁰

In the years after removal, we began to reestablish ourselves in Indian Territory. These times were difficult for us: coming to terms with leaving the land of our ancestors, dealing with starvation, enduring the raids of Texas Rangers and other tribes, and weathering the Civil War and Reconstruction. We persevered and ruled ourselves for more than 40 years, until our sovereignty was again abolished, this time by the Curtis Act of 1898. Throughout the 20th century, we continued to keep alive our traditions. We are again a self-governing and thriving nation, prospering in programs and services for our people, establishing businesses and practicing a rich culture passed down to us since we inhabited the lower Mississippi Valley, and long before.

³⁰ Ibid., 183.

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