

The choctaw in mississippi and western alabama history essay



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The Choctaw are a southeastern tribe that originally lived in what is now Mississippi, Western Alabama, and Eastern Louisiana, speaking the Muskogee language. Their word for themselves is Chata. They were a peaceful, democratic nation that was divided into townships with a leader, a Mingo, for each group. Today the Choctaw Nation covers 131, 524 acres in 11 counties in southeastern Oklahoma (Tiller , 824).

The Choctaw lived in villages located in three geographic groups, Okla Falaya, Okla Tannap, and Okla Tannali, which were located around the region's three major rivers - the Pearl, the Tombigbee, and the Pascagoula. The Choctaws were a matrilineal people, tracing descent through the mother's side, socially divided into groups called clans, or Iksas in their language. Two of the most important activities in their life was the Green Corn Dance, an annual ceremony held in late summer in anticipation of the harvest, and Ishtaboli, a ball game played with long sticks, similar to lacrosse. This is still an important sport among the contemporary Choctaw.

The Choctaw sustained themselves by hunting, fishing and farming, planting crops of corn, beans, squash, pumpkins and sweet potatoes, using tools made of wood flint and animal bones. The skins from the animals they hunted were used for clothing and moccasins. Women, children and the elderly supplemented the food supply with wild plants, fruit and nuts. Their homes were built from wood frames tied together with vines, and the interior plastered with mud, with a hole at the top for smoke to escape. A proud people in their appearance, men wore a belt and breechclout, adding upper garments in the winter made from feathers and the bark of the Mulberry tree. Women wore short skirts made from deerskin in the summer,

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moccasins and deerskin shawls in the winter. Both men and women wore jewelry, brightly colored ornaments made of seeds, nuts, animal bone, and stone. They also wore feathers in their hair.

Indigenous peoples' relationship to the land stems from the concept that the Creator brought them forth from the earth. They see themselves as children of the earth, and their two origin stories involve that concept. The dominant story is still an important part of their culture, involving an annual gathering at the place they believe they originated. The first origin story of the Choctaw involves their emergence from a place on the earth, Nanih Waiya, the Mother Mound. This was a large rectangular earthen mound that still exists in Winston County, Mississippi. Their origin stories say that they were the last of four tribes - including the Cherokee, Chickasaw and Creek - to emerge. The Choctaw decided to settle in the area, while the other tribes went their separate ways. The mound stands nearly 40 feet high with a base of one acre. Archaeologists believe from studying artifacts that the Choctaw lived here from about 500 B. C. E. until about 1700 C. E. the date of the early European explorers.

The second origin story involves a long migration from a place east of the Mississippi where they began relocation to the east to find a better home for themselves, led by a magic white dog that slept at the base of the pole each night. At the end of each day on their journey, a large pole was stuck in the earth and was found pointing east at the beginning of the next day. One day they awoke to find that the pole was standing erect and the dog had died, which they took as a sign that this was to be their new homeland.

Their history can be divided roughly into three periods: pre-removal, removal to Oklahoma, and going from tribe to nation there. European contact began when Spanish explorer Hernando De Soto landed in Florida in 1540, pillaging and burning villages, often enslaving the Choctaw people they encountered. District chief Tuscaloosa hoped that he could extend hospitality to the Spaniards, encouraging them to move on. The Spaniards and the Choctaw met and shared food while the Indians entertained them. However the Spaniards' were congenial only a short time, taking Tuscaloosa captive. He resisted, inspiring his people to free him. De Soto then went on to burn Mabila, the next village, killing 1, 500 Choctaws.

After their encounter with the Spaniards, the Choctaws remained free of European influence for 150 years. The French and subsequently the English were the next to enter Choctaw territory, the French being the dominant presence. The Choctaws learned quickly to play the French and English against each other, but were eventually surrounded by both geographically. Both European groups courted Choctaw allegiance in an attempt to gain power over each other, resulting in nearly a century of constant conflict for the Choctaws, often fighting against the Creek and Chickasaw in allegiances with the French and English.

After nearly fifty years of shifting allegiances and constant warfare between both European powers, civil war broke out among the Choctaws, with one group sympathetic to the English, the other to the French. The colonial domination in North America came to an end after the French and Indian war when France ceded all territory east of the Mississippi to the English. The Choctaw allied with the English until the American Revolution in 1775 when <https://assignbuster.com/the-choctaw-in-mississippi-and-western-alabama-history-essay/>

the Choctaw fought with the United States against the British, after which the English ceded their North American territory to the United States. This ended the British control, but eighty years of European contact had left its mark on the Choctaw, disrupting their traditional society, clan systems and tribal customs. The increasing intermarriage and mixed ancestry influenced the tribe's acceptance of European lifestyle. At that point they were under the control of the United States, which would change their lives for the worst.

The United States established dominance over the land that was gained from England after the American Revolution. They strengthened their influence by entering into treaties with the Choctaw, Chickasaw and Creek. The Choctaws signed the first of nine treaties with the United States on January 3, 1786.

The treaty established peace between the two parties and defined the tribe's eastern boundary consistent with the earlier English treaty. After 1795 the United States began to send agents to work with the Indians of the southeast for the purpose of managing Indian country. In 1798 Mississippi was formed from the southern portions of Mississippi and Alabama. By the turn of the 18th century the Choctaw population was at least 15, 000 and the early pre-removal period was relatively easy for the Choctaws before European contact.

Beginning with the Treaty of Fort Adams in 1801, the United States government gained over 2, 000 acres of Choctaw territory. In each succeeding treaty the Choctaws ceded more of their land, with compensation in annual payments to the tribe and the chiefs. As the United States gained more land, many Americans began to settle in Choctaw territory.

Missionaries began to establish schools that the Choctaws supported, for the education of their children rather than embracing Christianity itself.

As the Choctaws began to adapt their traditional customs changed. Their children learned spinning and weaving, and the women learned to make clothing worn by Whites. Their burial practices changed under missionary influence, and they stopped consulting their traditional medicine men and healers. Their justice system also changed to conform to American standards. Traditionally, if a Choctaw committed a crime, the victims' relatives would punish the accused. This was replaced by jury trial. With the influx of American settlers, the Choctaw were faced with a pressing problem: how to make a living. More settlers meant fewer animals for the Indians to hunt, hence fewer skins and furs to trade with. They began to build up a debt through buying food and goods from the English, which eventually worked against them.

In 1820 Generals Andrew Jackson and Thomas Hinds negotiated a treaty with the Choctaws to cede in excess of 5 million acres of their land in exchange for 13 million acres in the west. The debt they had acquired was used as a bargaining tool by the United States in the land cession.

History has neglected to adequately present the fact that the Choctaw were actually the first to travel a "trail of tears". The treaty that played the most significant role in Choctaw removal history was that of Dancing Rabbit Creek on September 27th 1830, signed by leaders Moshulatubbe and Greenwood LeFlore. It ceded their remaining land .

The foundation for the treaty was the Indian Removal Bill earlier that year. Andrew Jackson was president and in favor of Indian removal. The Choctaws were violently split over the treaty, resulting in about 5,000 remaining in Mississippi. An incentive of \$10.00 each was given to those choosing to relocate. Peter Pitchlynn, a mixed-blood Choctaw who spoke fluent English played a prominent role in negotiating the money to compensate the Indians for their Mississippi land. The United States extended citizenship to those remaining, subjecting them to government laws, and diminishing their stature as a tribe.

The removal efforts were disorganized, underfunded and ill prepared. The government hired several organizers to round up the Choctaw, with the process planned to take place in 3 phases, 1831, 1832 and 1833. Most of those removed walked, some were taken by wagons initially, but flooding and bad weather forced the plans to shift to steamboat transport. In some instances, those who walked endured sleet and freezing temperatures in scanty clothing. Dysentery and Typhoid plagued many. At one point, some got lost from the main group and waded barefoot through waist-high swamps. The removal effort did not allocate enough funds; consequently there was not enough food to feed them, or to provide blankets and tents. Many raided farmers' fields, eating raw pumpkins and pilfering fruit from orchards and gardens. At one point the government tried to compel the Indians to eat spoiled pork that had been stored at a military fort.

During the two years following the 1831 removal, the United States scheduled additional removal trips for the remaining Choctaws. These were equally underfunded and disorganized. After settling the Oklahoma territory <https://assignbuster.com/the-choctaw-in-mississippi-and-western-alabama-history-essay/>

the Choctaws gradually went through a significant transition from a community-based tribal society to a nation with a representative form of government. They established themselves into four districts, Okla Falaya, Apukshunnubbee, Moshulatubbe, and Pushmataha. Their capital was Nanih Waiya, the name of the sacred mound in Mississippi. They wrote a new constitution in 1834, established small cities in the districts, set up schools and incorporated the Chickasaw nation into theirs.

The new constitution established them as an independent separate nation, creating a new relationship with the United States, one of government to government. It was a significant victory for the Choctaws, one that brought them full circle from an independent nation, to United States dominance, back to a self-governing independent nation. After arrival in Oklahoma, the Choctaws relied on slaves to sustain their small farms and treated them as members of the family, but it also drew them into the Civil War on the side of the confederacy until they were ultimately defeated. After the close of the war, the Choctaws accepted emancipation and allowed former slaves to become free, but without legal or political rights. They were allowed to use and cultivate land there as a general friendliness existed between the two races. Economic development followed as the Choctaws began to establish themselves as a nation, with railroads and coal mining gradually employing many. The people began to take jobs in both areas, moving away from farming.

In 1885 Senator Henry L. Dawes (R-Massachusetts) introduced a bill that when passed, divided Indian lands into individual sections, or allotments. The Choctaws were threatened because it contradicted their values of communal

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land holding. It also threatened their rights as a self-governing nation guaranteed by the treaties. This was reversed by the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, prohibiting further allotment and allowed for the establishment of tribal governments.

Oklahoma Territory was organized from the western section of Indian Territory in 1889, and in 1906 Choctaw tribal government was dissolved, making them citizens of Oklahoma. The Choctaws today exist as two thriving self-governing nations of Mississippi and Oklahoma. They survived the onslaught of federal policies and have preserved their language, customs and sense of cultural community.

As of 2001, the Choctaw Nation, headquartered in Durant, Oklahoma, had a total enrolled population of 148, 976. It has a diversified economy that employs many tribal members in tribally run enterprises. Most prominent among the industries the Choctaw Nation has a stake in are agriculture and livestock, forestry, gaming, construction, fishing, and manufacturing, and tourism. The tribal government, reestablished in 1983, is based on a tribal council format, with one chief and 12 representatives. As with most reservations, unemployment and health care are major continuing issues. In 2001, the Choctaw unemployment rate was 38%. In 2004, the tribe opened a hospital constructed using tribal funds in Talihina, which has 37 beds for inpatient care and 52 examination rooms. Clinics serve populations across the various parts of the reservation. (Tiller, 827)

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Further Reading

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