

Iti Fabussa



'Chukka' the traditional Choctaw house

Dear Iti Fabvssa,

What can you tell me about early Choctaw houses?

– Shirley

Dear Shirley,

Thank you for your great question! The traditional house is known as “chukka” in the Choctaw language. Our ancestors conceived and designed the chukka to transform common local raw materials into comfortable and strong buildings that met their basic needs of shelter, protection, and storage. Like today, these houses served as the physical setting of family life, a comfortable place to visit with friends, to share meals, and to sit back and relax from a day’s work and stress. The specific forms of traditional Choctaw houses have changed through time, to meet changing needs and tastes. This segment will focus on the types of traditional houses that were built by Choctaw people in the 1700s.

When Bernard Romans traveled across the Choctaw and Chickasaw homeland in the 1770s, he wrote that the houses of both tribes were identical, and that they included a summer house and a winter house. Edward Mease described a Choctaw winter house that he visited in the early 1770s as follows:

This house is nearly of a circular figure and built of clay mixed with haulm [straw or grass]. The top is conical and covered with a kind of thatch [the nature of] which I cou’d not make out. The inside roof is divided into four parts and there are cane seats raised about two feet from the ground which go round the building (I mean on the inside), broad enough to lie upon, making the wall serve the purpose of a pillow. Underneath these seats or beds they keep their potatoes and pumpions, cover’d with earth, but their corn is in a building by itself raised at least eight feet from the ground. The fire place is in the middle of the floor, just as in some parts of the Highlands of Scotland only they have no aperture at top to evacuate the smoke. The door is opposite one side (for the house is round without, yet on the inside it approaches near to the figure of an octagon, and is exceeding small both in height and breadth (re-



A Choctaw winter house made by Les Williston, Tushka Homma Council House Grounds.

produced in Swanton 2001:30).

James Adair documented the mid-1700s construction of Chickasaw / northern Choctaw houses in impressive detail (Adair 1775:419-420), this will be summarized in the following paragraphs:

According to Adair, the construction of winter houses usually began when a chill could be felt in the fall air. House-building was a well-organized activity, in which community members came together to raise a family’s dwelling. The work could be completed in just one day.

Work commenced with setting a series of forked posts in the ground in a circular shape, about five or six feet high. These basically served as the studs for the walls and as the outer support for the roof. Four large pine posts were then emplaced in the ground near the center of the house to help hold up the center of the roof. The wall posts were interwoven with flexible, split strips from the heartwood of the oak tree. Heavy logs were laid with one end on these vertical wall posts, and the other, raised up on one of the four big posts set near the center of the house. Dry poles were set atop these sloping roof logs, and woven with the oak splints. After the framework was complete, the entire structure was daubed with clay mixed with dry grass. This served as an insulation, similar to adobe of the southwest. When the daubing was half-way dry, the roof was thatched with dry grass. Poles were laid on top of the thatch and securely lashed down to hold the thatch in place. The doors were made wide enough for only one person to enter, while the houses usually had a winding entrance for six or seven feet to slow cold wind and intruders. The floor of the house was often made a meter lower than the surrounding ground. This helped make the house warmer, and provided protection from enemy bullets.

Beds lined the inner walls of the house. These set up several feet off the ground on a platform of oak, making it harder for fleas to attack. The mattresses were made of split cane and covered in softly tanned hides of panthers, buffalo, or deer.

A fire was burned in a hearth on the ground at the center of the

hut in the evening and covered with ashes at night. According to Adair, coals would be scraped out of the fire and taken to individual beds during the night as needed. With little ventilation, these houses were dark and smoky, and people often slept with their heads covered to help filter the smoke (Ibid. 420).

Drawing from a variety of sources, we can picture what one would experience upon stooping down to enter the doorway of such a house on a winter day. The only source of light inside, a sacred fire of dry hickory wood, burns silently and throws flickering yellow light onto the walls. The warmed air juxtaposes the aromas of smoke, earth, and beans cooking on the fire. On the floor around the hearth, are several clay cooking pots and eating bowls, sitting at the edges of finely woven cane mats that cover the hard-packed ground. Sliced and dried fruits and vegetables hang on strings from the rafters and central posts, casting their own unique shadows on the walls. The walls themselves are decorated with tanned and painted hides, baskets, woven belts, and weapons ready to defend the community in an instant. Family members and clan members from the next house comfortably lounge on the cane seats around the walls, talking and laughing in Choctaw, even the toddlers. This scene was as familiar to our ancestors as our dining rooms are to us. If suddenly transported into this, a Choctaw of today just might feel a little strange, perhaps strangely at home...

A type of winter house was also made in the southern part of Choctaw country. These round, domed structures had frames made of small saplings and were thatched with palmetto on their roofs and walls. A hole in the top of the roof for smoke to escape (Bushnell 1909:7). The large door visible in one surviving image suggests that Choctaws living in this area had less cold to deal with than their northern neighbors.

With the influx of large numbers of Europeans into the Choctaw homeland, during the first part of the 1800s, more and more Choctaws began to live in log cabins. Even the style of the traditional Choctaw winter house was altered to be more like a cabin. Henry Halbert (n.d.) describes this later style Choctaw winter house as follows:

A square structure of round logs, notched and fitted into each other at the corners, was built up to about seven feet in height. At this point the roof or rather top and gable ends were constructed in this manner, the house supposed to stand east and west: The logs formed the gable ends were gradually made shorter, the logs on the north and south sides resting on these gable end logs; and the structure was thus continued until a single log or ridge pole, resting on the uppermost gable end logs, formed the top of the cover. All the cracks between the logs from top to bottom were closed with clay mortar, making the house practically air proof.

To make a water-proof roof, wide boards 20 feet or more in length were used. The boards were slightly cut about midway of their length so as to bend easily at this place. They were then placed and bent over the house, the cut places resting and bending on the ridge pole, and long enough to make sufficient eaves to protect the daubed walls from the drift of the rain.

The floor of the house was made of earth about a foot high and packed hard. When the house was needed for cold weather, a fire of dry hickory bark was made in the middle of the floor, and when the fire was burned to coals, it was covered with ashes and embers. The door was then closed. The house, now very warm, was ready for the sleepers, who made their pallets on the floor around the fire.

Winter houses of this form were used by some of the Mississippi Choctaw until 1850 (ibid.) Some of the Choctaw living in Louisi-

ana lived in circular, palmetto-covered winter houses up until 1900.

Period descriptions (e.g. Adair 1775:419; Anonymous 1918[1755]), indicate that unlike the traditional winter houses, Choctaw summer houses were rectangular in outline, with a peaked, gabled roof. These roofs had an opening at each end to promote airflow and allow smoke to escape. Walls were solid, and covered in clay mortar, like a winter house. Sometimes, they were even white-washed with powder from burned mussel shells.

According to Adair (1775:418-419), summer house construction began with setting vertical pine posts in the ground at the corners of the structure. Additionally, three tall posts were vertically emplaced along the center line of the house, one at each gabled end, and one in the center. A long, horizontal ridge pole was to the top of these posts. Sometimes, the rafters were long saplings that laid across the entire roof. They were notched at the ridgepole and fastened with strips of oak or hickory. Lathing was made of split saplings, and the roof was covered in split pine or cypress clapboards. These were then covered in bark and weighted down with an elaborate system of heavy logs. Doors were made from split poplar, chosen because of its light weight. The interior of these structures had raised beds made of cane.

Choctaws made other structures, basically similar to that just described, but less substantial. Some of these had one wall on the north side, or no walls at all. Such buildings were used to provide shade and keep the rain off during warm weather. Sometimes people must have lived in them too.

During the 1700s, Choctaws also made several types of temporary houses. The type constructed at cane-harvesting camps has already been described (Iti Fabvssa Feb. 2011). On long trips, lean-tos were quickly constructed of saplings, bark, and other materials readily at hand (see photo). Also, a peaked-roof bark structures were made by Choctaws during extended winter hunts. These will be covered in more detail in a future issue.

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