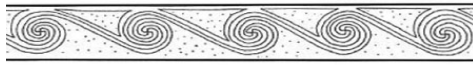


## Iti Fabussa



# Chahta Vba Isht Taloa: The Choctaw Hymns

Whether in a rural area in southeastern Oklahoma, or in an urban gathering, one of the most distinctive elements of Choctaw Christian church services are the beautiful, powerful hymns sung in the Choctaw language.

For many people, Choctaw hymns like #48, and #21 have become as much a part of their Choctaw identity as *bvnaha* bread and stickball.

For some, these hymns convey a relationship with God that defines them as Choctaw people. The Choctaw Hymnal has been a part of Choctaw church services for many generations, but much of the knowledge about how the hymnal was created, and about the people who wrote the Choctaw hymns has been forgotten.

This month's edition of *Iti Fabussa* will present a little bit of the history of the Choctaw hymns and hymn composers.

Long before Europeans arrived on this continent, Choctaw people had a deep spirituality and an ancient singing tradition. There were specific songs for hunting, for stickball, for playing hand games, for going to war, songs sung for the safety of loved ones away at war, songs a person sung when facing death, and songs sung during sacred dances at the Green Corn Ceremony.

Christian hymns were brought to Choctaw country by protestant Missionaries who arrived in 1819 at the request of Chiefs *Mushulabbee* and *David Folsom*. After they got to Choctaw country, most of the early Protestant missionaries studied to learn the Choctaw language so that they could directly communicate with the Choctaw people. Beyond just learning the language, they also had to figure out how to communicate specialized Christian concepts, which the Choctaw language was not necessarily designed to communicate. One method was to impose Christian meanings on some Choctaw words. Thus, "*okchalinichi*", meaning "to deliver from danger", was used to refer to a Christian rebirth. Another technique was to describe biblical concepts literally with Choctaw words. For example, Choctaw society did not have shepherds or sheep, so the missionaries used the Choctaw phrase "*chukfahpowa apistikeli*", meaning literally "domesticated rabbit-watcher" for "shepherd."

With fluency in the Choctaw language and a system of Choctaw words worked out to refer to isoteric Christian concepts, early Protestant missionaries preached in Choctaw. Not all Choctaw people ever converted to Christianity. Some have always followed ancient Choctaw spiritual ways. Nevertheless, many Choctaw people did convert to Christian faiths, worked to help the missionaries, and became ministers themselves.

Missionaries and Choctaw people worked together to create a Choctaw dictionary and writing system. Thereafter, it became possible to compose and write down hymns in the Choctaw language. According to one source, the first Choctaw hymn was written by *Cyrus Byington* in 1824. Within a year, he had composed nine more (Spalding 1975:94). Other missionaries like *Loring S. Williams* began to write Choctaw hymns, but it wasn't just the missionaries doing the composing. In a letter back East, one missionary wrote of an anonymous Choctaw man at his congregations who could neither read nor write, who independently composed a beautiful hymn in the Choctaw language.

Within a few years, *Alfred Wright* and *Cyrus Byington* began to compile a formal Choctaw hymnal. First published in 1829, it

contained Choctaw 55 hymns and 5 doxologies, including today's hymn numbers 11, 54, 55, 60, and an earlier version of Hymn 35. All of the hymns in this original Choctaw hymnal were probably sung by Choctaw people on the first wave of the Trail of Tears (1830-1833). Some of today's most popular Choctaw hymns including numbers 21, 48, 53, and 112 were not yet in the hymnal. Whether these hymns were sung on the 1830's Trail of Tears or even if they had been written yet is unknown to the author.

After the initial waves of the Trail of Tears, subsequent editions of the Choctaw hymnal were created, incorporating new hymns, a marriage service, funeral service, and scriptures. The last major group of Choctaw hymns was added in 1850 (Spalding 1975:94), completing the main body of songs that are in today's hymnal. Thereafter, new additions of the Choctaw hymnal continued to be formatted. At least nine editions have been published since the hymnal was first created.

Although many of the songs in the Choctaw hymnal are unattributed, some of them have the composer's initials at the bottom of the page. The following partial list matches some of the initials with the corresponding composers:

A. W.	Alfred Wright
B. & P.	C. Byington and P. P. Pitchlynn
C. B.	Cyrus Byington
D.	Capt. Joseph Dukes
D. F.	David Folsom.
F.	Rev. Pliny Fisk
G. L. W.	George L. Williams
I. F.	Rev. Israel Folsom
J. E. D.	Rev. Jonathan Edwards Dwight
K.	John P. Kingsbury
L. S. W.	Loring S. Williams
P. P. P.	Peter P. Pitchlynn

*Alfred Wright*, *Cyrus Byington*, *John Kingsbury*, and *Loring S. Williams* were Anglo-American Missionaries. The other hymn composers on this list were Choctaw men.

The Choctaw men who composed the hymns faced incredible challenges in their lifetimes, from the prospect of having to leave the sacred homeland, to surviving the Trail of Tears, to dealing with the loss of life and juxtaposition caused by forced removal, to rebuilding their Nation.

When we think about the hymns they wrote in the context of their lives, it makes their words all the more powerful. Many of the Choctaw hymn writers spent their lives working for their people, and can be considered among the founding fathers of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.

*David Folsom* led a group of Choctaw warriors supporting *Andrew Jackson* in the War of 1812.

*Folsom* was one of the leaders that made the initial request for Protestant missionaries to enter Choctaw country, and he helped teach the Choctaw language to *Cyrus Byington*. As a Choctaw delegate to the United States, he was with *Pushmataha* when he died. Later, he became one of the most powerful Choctaw Chiefs and was chosen to be part of a Choctaw scouting party to investigate lands in Oklahoma. During Removal, he personally led a

party of Choctaw people over the Trail of Tears to Oklahoma.

Peter P. Pitchlynn was a graduate of the University of Nashville. He maintained a diplomatic Choctaw presence in Washington D.C. during the American Civil War, and formally surrendered the Choctaw Nation to the United States at the close of the war. Pitchlynn served as Principle Chief during and immediately after the end of the war. He also served as a superintendent of Choctaw Academy.

Rev. J. E. Dwight was the first Choctaw to attend Dartmouth College in 1838. He helped form the Skullyville Constitution and translated the acts and resolutions of the Choctaw council over a period of years. His hymn translations can be found in the sixth and later editions of the Choctaw hymnal.

Pliny Fisk was the first Choctaw Presbyterian minister. He served as pastor of Mt. Zion, and was widely known for his speaking abilities.

Captain Joseph Dukes attended the school at Mayhew Mission as a youth. As a young man, he helped Byington create the

Choctaw grammar and dictionary. He also helped Alfred Wright translate the book of Psalms into Choctaw and he preached at Wheelock Mission.

Israel Folsom, brother of David, served as a Choctaw delegate to Washington D.C, served a Presbyterian minister at Boggy Depot, was the first to translate the Lord's Prayer into Choctaw, and worked to make education more available to young Choctaw women.

The Choctaw hymns come to us from remarkable individuals, both Choctaw and Anglo, who dedicated their lives to doing what they thought would help the Choctaw people during one of the darkest periods in Choctaw history. In the words of these hymns, we relive the thoughts of the authors' hearts, we are exposed to the spirituality that these individuals drew upon to survive the Trail of Tears, and we sing eloquent and deeply fluent expressions in the Choctaw language.

The Choctaw Hymns are an important part of the Choctaw story and, and for many tribal members, they will probably always be an important part of Choctaw life.