

Choctaw resistance to removal from ancient homeland

In May 2014, hundreds of Choctaw people met at Wheelock Academy to commemorate the sacrifices made by ancestors who, many generations ago, came to what is now Oklahoma on the Trail of Tears. Removing from an ancient homeland that literally was (and continues to be) an important part of Choctaw culture and identity was not an easy thing for these ancestors to do, nor was surviving the Trail of Tears itself. While walking the Trail of Tears commemorative walk, and placing oneself in the footsteps of those who walked the original Trail of Tears, it would be difficult to not reflect on the thoughts, motivations, and feelings that were carried by those people 180 years ago. As the miles wore on, one may wonder things like: Did any Choctaw people come to Oklahoma willingly? How much coercion was involved? Did any Choctaw people resist removal, and if so, how did they?

The answers to all of these questions are complex and almost as varied as the different personalities of the families and individuals who found themselves living in the very challenging and uncertain time of Removal. A few individuals came to Oklahoma willingly; many faced the hardships of the Trail of Tears because they saw no other option for the future of the Choctaw people, and a few Choctaw individuals profited off of the Removal of their friends and families. Most Choctaw individuals did resist Removal on some level, but the level varied from words, to passive resistance, to taking up arms and fighting to the death. Over the next four installments, Iti Fabvssa will explore four different ways in which Choctaw individuals and communities resisted Removal and the Trail of Tears.

Armed Resistance
Choctaw people are not widely known to have used force to oppose removal. In speeches to American representatives in the 1820s Choctaw Chiefs often emphasized that the Tribe had never taken up arms against the United States. While the tribe as a whole never faced the United States on a battlefield some groups of Choctaw people actually did exactly that in hopes of preventing removal. In the fall of 1811, Shawnee leader Tecumseh toured Choctaw villages, encouraging the Choctaw people to join with the Shawnee and other Native American Tribes in fighting against the newly established United States. Choctaw leaders, particularly Pushmataha, debated Tecumseh at each speech, and led the Choctaw people away from war. After leaving Choctaw country, Tecumseh traveled to Muscogee towns, where his message received a more welcome reception.

In the summer of 1813, principle Choctaw leaders met in council for several days with Muscogee leaders, who represented the Red Sticks, on the issue of whether or not to go to war with the United States. The council ended with the Muscogee Red Sticks firmly in favor of war and the Choctaw leaders fully against it (Halbert n.d.). Later that year when the Creek War began, Choctaw leaders imposed a death penalty on any Choctaw person who joined the Red Sticks in their attacks against American citizens. Hundreds of Choctaw warriors joined with the Americans fighting against the Muscogee Red Sticks in the Creek War and in battles of the broader War of 1812. However, some Choctaw families went against their leaders wishes, and risked their

lives by joining the Red Sticks in their fight against the Americans.

Among them were 30 Choctaw warriors from the Yan-nubbe town who followed Talan Bola, a Muscogee Red Stick Chief. Later Choctaw warriors from the town of Patchelchovoka also joined the Red Sticks (Halbert n.d.). Based in the Black Warrior River valley, these small Choctaw forces raided local American frontier settlements.

The motivation of these Choctaw people to join the Red Sticks and fight against other Choctaws has not been recorded. However, based on Tecumseh's recorded speeches at Choctaw villages, it would seem that they took up arms to proactively face a foe that was steadily pushing Native American groups out of their homelands. The feelings of these Choctaw individuals were strong enough that they were willing to go against their own leaders in taking up arms against the United States. It was an early and very direct form of resistance against Removal.

Pro-American Choctaw forces entered the Black Warrior area, and cleared it of Red Sticks, both Muscogee and Choctaw. Ultimately, the Americans were victorious in both the Creek War and in the War of 1812. However, for some Choctaw families, the war against the United States did not end with these defeats.

Late in the war, Lt. Col. Edward Nicholls of the British Royal Marines and Muscogee allies built a fort at Prospect Bluff along the waters of the Apalachicola River, in Spanish territory, in what is now the state of Florida. In 1815, Nicholls transferred the fort and its arms to a local resistance group of black militiamen and a few Seminole warriors (Forbes 1821:200-205). During this time an unnamed Choctaw Chief and 25 of his warriors came to live at the Fort. It is likely that they were some of the Choctaw people who had fought on the side of the Red Sticks during the recent Creek War.

In the spring of 1816, Col. Andrew Jackson was ordered to destroy the Fort at Prospect Bluff, even though it was on Spanish soil. Jackson corresponded with the Spanish Governor in Pensacola asking for permission to attack the Fort, but the Governor stalled the talks fearing the possible counter attacks from the Seminoles.

Jackson instead devised a plan to have his Lt. Col. Duncan Lamont Clinch take a supply convoy by the fort in hopes that it would be fired upon, giving a cause for the United States to destroy it. That plan was successful. As American forces moved into the area, they came upon a pro-American Muscogee force of 150 warriors, lead by Chief McIntosh, Captain Isaacs, and Koteha-haigo. Chief McIntosh had been tasked by Jackson, prior to these events, to raid the fort. In exchange McIntosh would be rewarded \$50 per slave captured, and would be given the fort's armaments and supplies. The Chiefs met with Clinch that night and agreed to help Clinch in his efforts against the Fort (Heidler 1996:74).

In the prelude to battle, the Americans sent five men on a reconnaissance to find drinking water. In an ambush the Choctaw warriors, 40 black militia, and several Seminole warriors killed four of the men (Forbes1821:201, Heidler 1996:71).

Clinch, unaware of these events, ordered McIntosh, Captain Isaacs, and Koteha-haigo

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and their warriors to surround the Fort and wait. As the Muscogee surrounded the fort on three sides the Fort's defenders shot back, but without effect; they did not have the training to properly aim and fire the cannons that lined the fort. Clinch sent McIntosh to demand the surrender. The fort's leaders refused and hoisted a red flag with an English jack on it, indicating that they would die rather than surrender. The next morning, soon after artillery fire began, America forces fired a round of heated shot over the wall and hit the Fort's magazine. The magazine exploded destroying most of the fort and killing 270 of the inhabitants (Forbes 1821:200-205, Heidler 1996:74). The leader of the black militia the Choctaw chief somehow survived, but were soon captured. They were both tortured and executed by the Muscogee warriors (Heidler 1996:74)

This battle is said to be one of the main catalyst events that led up to what would be called the Seminole Wars. The Choctaws that fought in this battle did so as an act of resistance to policy of removal of their people under the American banner of manifest destiny. Later documents indicate that some of them did survive the battle, but their ultimate fate is unknown.

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