

Iti Fabussa

Our ancient neighbors from the past into the present

Ethnic diversity in what is now the southeastern United States did not begin with European contact. When Europeans first began to build permanent settlements in the Choctaw region (roughly 300 years ago), it was already a multi-ethnic place, occupied by complex, numerous, and diverse Native American tribes. Our ancestors were a product of this diversity; many of them spoke multiple tribal languages, knew multiple tribal customs, and had family members from other neighboring tribes. Formalized relationships with these tribes were carefully negotiated by Choctaw leaders and helped to define the course of Choctaw and southeastern history. This month, Iti Fabussa takes a look at some of the tribes that were our neighbors 300 years ago, and briefly examines where they are today.

Chickasaw – In 1700, the Chickasaw were living about 100 miles north of Choctaw territory. Both Chickasaw and Choctaw oral stories indicate that the two tribes were once part of the same group. It is no surprise that the Chickasaw and Choctaw language are mutually understandable and the tribes are close culturally. Yet, by 300 years ago, the Choctaw and Chickasaw had become bitter enemies. The Choctaw (allied with the French) and the Chickasaw (allied with the English) fought each other regularly. Lasting peace was made in 1759. In 1837, the Chickasaw moved in with the Choctaws in Indian Territory (Oklahoma). In 1855, the Choctaw Nation ceded lands for the establishment of the Chickasaw Nation to our west. This is where Chickasaw Nation is still located today.

Alabama – 300 years ago, the Alabama lived to the east of the Choctaw, on the Alabama River. Several generations earlier they had lived in what is now Mississippi. Like the Chickasaws, the Alabama have a language and culture that are similar to the Choctaw, and according to some oral traditions all three tribes were once a part of the same group. The Alabama tribe's name may come from the Choctaw phrase "Alba Amo," meaning "Vegetation-Gatherers" (Halbert 1899:65). During the French colonial period, the Alabama were often allied with the English and regularly fought against the Choctaw. Today the Alabama-Coushatta tribe of Texas lives near the town of Livingston, and the Alabama Quassarte tribal town is located within the Muscogee "Creek" Nation in Oklahoma.

Tohoma/Naniaba – In the early 1700s, the Tohoma and Naniaba tribes lived to the southeast of the Choctaw, on the Tombigbee River, above its confluence with the Alabama River. Tohoma/Naniaba language and culture were similar or identical to Choctaw language and culture of the time period, although the Tohoma were said to have darker skin than the Choctaw (Waselkov and Gums 2000). These two small tribes were closely allied with the Choctaw, and allowed Choctaw people to stay in their villages when they were processing salt from nearby springs. In the 1760s, the Tohoma/Naniaba joined the Choctaw tribe, so today, some Choctaw tribal members are descended from the Tohoma and Naniaba.

Mobila – The Mobila were a slightly larger tribe that lived on Mobile Bay in 1700. Under Chief Tsvhkalusa, they had fought and crippled an invading Spanish army under Hernando DeSoto, 160 years earlier. The Mobila language was very similar Choctaw, and they had a close political alliance with the Choctaw. The name "Mobila" may come from the Choctaw word "Moieil", meaning "To Paddle" (Halbert 1899:68). Mobile, Alabama, derives its name from the tribe. In the 1760s, some of the Mobila tribe joined the Choctaw; others moved on to Louisiana. Some of today's Choctaw people are descended from the Mobila.

Pensacola – The name "Pensacola" comes from the Choctaw phrase "Pvshi Okla," meaning "Hair People" (Swanton 1952:136). This tribe lived around Pensacola Bay in the Florida panhandle. The Pensacola spoke a Muskogean dialect, and in 1700 were fighting against the Mobila and later against the Choctaws. A few years afterwards, the Pensacola moved to the Pearl River and then vanished from recorded history (Waselkov and Gumm 2000:21-23).

Pascagoula – The Pascagoula lived to the south of the Choctaws. The two tribes were on good terms and their connectedness is shown through similar pottery designs. The name "Pascagoula" comes from the Choctaw term "Pvaska Okla,"



meaning "Bread People." In the late 1700s, the Pascagoula moved west, and today some of their descendants are among several Oklahoma/Texas tribes today.

Biloxi – The Biloxi are a Siouan-speaking tribe that may have originated in the Ohio River Valley. In 1700, they lived on the Pascagoula River, south of the Pascagoula tribe. Some Biloxi descendants moved to Texas and Oklahoma, others amalgamated with the Tunica tribe. Today, their descendants make up the Tunica-Biloxi tribe of Louisiana.

Houma – The tribe's name comes from the Choctaw word "Homa," meaning "Red." The Houma are linguistically and culturally related to the Choctaw. In 1700, they lived on the east bank of the Mississippi River, across from the mouth of the Red River. In 1706, after an attack by the Tunica, the tribe moved to the New Orleans area. Today, thousands of Houma descendants live in Louisiana.

Acolapissa – The tribe's name comes from the Choctaw phrase "Haldo Pisa," meaning "Hears and Sees." In 1700, this tribe lived on the Pearl River, to the southwest of the Choctaw. Culturally and linguistically related to the Choctawan groups, after a series of movements, they merged with the Houma.

Natchez – The Natchez lived on the Mississippi River to the west of the Choctaw. They spoke their own language and were noted for their centralized political structure. After repeated affronts by the French, the Natchez attacked and routed the local French settlement in 1730. In retaliation, the French, and their Choctaw allies decimated the Natchez tribe. Survivors were sold into slavery or fled to English-Allied tribes for asylum. Today, some individuals living among the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, the Muscogee "Creek" Nation, and the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma identify themselves as Natchez.

Tunica – The Tunica were living near the mouth of the Yazoo River in 1700. In 1706, they moved in with the Houma and attacked them. In the late 1700s, Tunica moved to the Marksville area of Louisiana. Today, their descendants make up part of the Tunica-Biloxi tribe of Louisiana.

Yazoo – The tribe lived on the Yazoo River to the northwest of the Choctaw. They spoke a language that was related to Tunica (Barnett 2012:77). Interestingly, in the 1700s, two Choctaw towns were named "East Yazoo" and "West Yazoo." Their relationship

to the Yazoo tribe is unknown. In 1730, the Yazoo attacked the French along with the Natchez. Afterwards, the Yazoo tribe was decimated by the Quapaw. Survivors were sold into slavery in distant places or may have joined the Choctaw and Chickasaw.

Chakchiuma – "Chakchiuma" comes from the Choctaw phrase "Shakshi Homma," meaning "Red Crawfish." The Chakchiuma are said to have broken off from the Choctaw, moved to present-day Arkansas, and then to have been forced back into present-day Mississippi between the Choctaw and Chickasaw. Reportedly the Chakchiuma began raiding both the Choctaw and Chickasaw. Finally, a Choctaw/Chickasaw coalition destroyed the Chakchiuma tribe, with survivors joining the Choctaw and Chickasaw. Several Choctaw chiefs, including Coleman Cole were Chakchiuma descendants (Cushman 1899).

Taensa – In 1700s, the Taensa were living in present-day northeast Louisiana. Through the 1700s, they moved down the Mississippi River to near New Orleans, and then over to the Mobile, Alabama, area, where they presumably mixed with Choctawan people. In 1763, they moved to the Red River in Louisiana. Today, a formal Taensa tribe does not exist, but their descendants are among the Choctaw, Chatimacha, and Alabama tribes.

Quapaw – The Quapaw are a Siouan tribe, closely related to the Osage, Kansas, and Omaha. In 1700, they were living at the junction of the Arkansas and the Mississippi River. At times, the Quapaw were Choctaw trading partners. At other times, Quapaws attacked Choctaw hunting parties for trespassing on their lands in Arkansas. Today, Quapaw Nation is located in northeastern Oklahoma.

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