



Thank you, Chief Aufaumatauba's daughter

For this month's edition of Iti Fabvssa, we are diverging slightly from our usual format. Rather than responding to a written-in question, we are taking this opportunity to make our readership aware of the positive things that a very special Choctaw woman has been doing for the Tribe over the last month and also to thank her.

We can't give you this woman's name, but she is the daughter of Choctaw Chief Aufaumatauba. She was born in what is now southwestern Alabama, in the Oklahannali or "Sixtowns" District of the Choctaw tribe, sometime around the year 1800. She grew up and lived there with her community until her untimely death in her mid-20s. Her loved ones laid her remains to rest in a small earth mound, intending for them to slowly return to the earth in peace.

Around that time, Choctaw leaders at the tribal level ceded this land to the United States in the Treaty of Hoe Buckintooopa (or "Hobvk Itopa"). As a result, this woman's community had to leave her burial behind, and in time, many of those who knew her were probably forced to emigrate to Oklahoma on the Trail of Tears. A United States arsenal was soon built near her burial spot.

As happens much, much too often to our Choctaw ancestors, without family or friends in the area to actively watch and protect her grave, this woman's bones were dug up by a collector as a kind of morbid trophy. They were then shipped to the eastern United States, and spent 140 years in collections, eventually ending up at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History. From the traditional Choctaw perspective held by this woman when she was alive, a perspective that is still held by many tribal members today, such grave desecration is one of the most despicable and hurtful offenses that can be done to a person or a community.

For a long time, tribal people had no recourse for righting such wrongs. However, beginning in the late 1980s, Native American organizers and lawmakers helped bring about legislation that makes it possible for tribes to reclaim and repatriate the remains of their ancestors from among the tens of thousands of Native American human remains held in the collections of federally funded institutions. In 2004, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and the repatriation staff at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History (one of whom is herself Choctaw) began cooperatively working on the long documentation process that would make it legally possible for the museum to return Aufaumatauba's daughter's remains back into Choctaw control.

This summer, after six years of hard work by both parties, the remains were ready to be transferred to the joint custody of the three federally recognized Choctaw tribes, which include the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, and the Jena Band of Choctaw Indians. In July, representatives from each made the journey to Washington, D.C., for

the formal repatriation. We came with a variety of emotions, but one expectation likely shared between all of us was that a wrong was about to be righted. Specifically, after the mistreatment of Aufaumatauba's daughter's remains, something good was going to be done for her and for the tribe in bringing her back to her home. However, we were soon humbled to realize that rather than us helping to do anything noteworthy while we were in D.C.; it was really this ancestor herself who began bringing about a lot of positive things for Choctaw people. It happened in ways no one could have conceived at the beginning of the trip:

The three federally recognized Choctaw tribes have been separated since the Trail of Tears. However, Aufaumatauba's daughter lived before this imposed separation and is potentially ancestral to all three groups. Because of this, representatives from each of these Choctaw tribes came to D.C. working together as one. During this contact, a recurring topic of discussion concerned the ways that the historic preservation departments from the three tribes can work to help each other on a variety of issues. Joint cultural activities were planned that will continue to bring members from each of these tribes together in the future.

Over the week, the Choctaw representatives were allowed to view the Choctaw collections in the National Museum of Natural History and National Museum of the American Indian. We saw and handled hundreds of non-burial Choctaw items made by our ancestors more than a century ago including blowguns, moccasins, bows, arrows, pottery, baskets, beadwork, drums, stickball sticks, baskets and much more. These objects represent the traditional knowledge developed by our ancestors, and were an important part of their Choctaw identity. In viewing these collections, a great deal of information on Choctaw history and traditional life-ways was shared between the three Choctaw tribes and the Smithsonian staff, with everyone learning a tremendous amount about the lives of our ancestors. Representatives from Choctaw Nation formally documented many of the pieces in these collections, making it possible for representatives from each of the Choctaw tribes to have hundreds of photographs and other information to share with tribal members back home.

During the visit, the Smithsonian staff informed the Choctaw representatives about the programs and funding that could potentially help our tribes to set up education programs to strengthen our traditional culture and arts. They also told us about the possibility of the Smithsonian loaning some of its Choctaw collections to tribal museums such as at the Tushka Homma Capitol, so that more Choctaw people can see these Choctaw national treasures. We were additionally made aware of potential opportunities for other tribal representatives to one day come to D.C. to study the Choctaw collections, and of programs to assist budding Choctaw artists. Each of these has the potential to bring the Smithsonian

and the Choctaw tribes in mutually beneficial partnerships that could help both well into the foreseeable future.

As we left Washington, D.C., we were humbled and amazed by all that Chief Aufaumatauba's daughter had brought about for Choctaw people living today ... She wasn't done yet. The reburial brought Choctaw Nation staff to Alabama, and into cooperation with the MOWA Band of Choctaw Indians, who still reside in the state. Again, relationships were created there that will help to bring Choctaws together into the future.

Moreover, on our way to meet the MOWAs, we had the opportunity to visit the Alabama State Archives, in Montgomery, Ala. This collection houses the unpublished manuscripts of Henry S. Halbert. In the late 1800s, Halbert lived with the Mississippi Choctaw. He had a strong interest in the Choctaw people, and spoke Choctaw fluently. His manuscripts represent a vast wealth of information for today's Choctaw people about our ancestors. This information, given from the mouths of Choctaw elders a century ago, includes in-depth descriptions of making and firing Choctaw pottery, Choctaws bows and arrows, Choctaw baskets, a detailed account of the way our ancestors used to plant their different types of gardens and the plants they put in each of them, recipes for many traditional Choctaw foods written in Choctaw and in English, funny stories, war stories, and funny war stories that go back into the 1700s, a complete muster role of the Choctaw soldiers who fought under Chief Pushmataha in the War of 1812, descriptions of ancient Choctaw dances no-longer remembered in today's communities, details on Choctaw house-building, name-giving, time-keeping, child-rearing, and much, much more. These unpublished manuscripts are arguably the best written source on Choctaw traditional life in existence, and there

they sat in the Alabama State Archives! We would not have seen these if it was not for Chief Aufaumatauba's daughter bringing us through Montgomery.

Chief Aufaumatauba's daughter passed from this life at an early age, during one of the darkest points in Choctaw history. Her home was overrun, her grave was desecrated, and her remains shipped nearly 1,000 miles away and put in storage for 140 years. In the summer of 2010, through her repatriation, this woman has brought back a tremendous amount of information about Choctaw life to today's Choctaw communities, and has made the cultural departments of Choctaw tribes more aware of the many opportunities for cooperation we have with each other, and with other groups like the Smithsonian staff. Her remains are back at rest in a place that will be protected, but all of the good things that her repatriation has brought to light for Choctaw people will live on in up-coming generations.

Aufaumatauba imvllatek, nana moyoma ish-michi-tuka, ehochi-yakoke. Chi-foni -yvt fohachi akinli!

Note – The Choctaw Nation Historic Preservation Department is already working on ways of making the information on Choctaw history and traditional life obtained at the Smithsonian and at the Alabama Archives available and accessible to tribal people in Oklahoma, including possible publication. However, the sheer volume and detail of this “new” information will require quite some time to completely process. For more information, please call 1-800-522-6170 ext. 2216.

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