



# Choctaw place names in 'Oklahumma'

Dear Iti Fabvssa,

I've got a question about Choctaw towns and places in southeastern Oklahoma and what their names might translate to in English. If possible I'd also like to know a little bit about their history. Thank you.

Ryan

The connection that Choctaws, as indigenous people, have with our land has always been a very close one. The form of agriculture that our ancestors developed, their methods of hunting and gathering, and their practices of walking on footpaths and traveling by streams in canoes, all made them intimately familiar with every feature on the landscape of their Homeland. They gave names to many of its places. The names that they chose often literally describe a notable characteristic of a particular spot, convey the type of natural resources to be found there, give the specific use to which the land was put, or refer to a historical event that took place there. Still today, ancient Choctaw names dot the map in Mississippi, western Alabama, northern Florida, and eastern Louisiana, even in spots that have had no Choctaw settlements now for 200 years. These names, many of them woven in to Choctaw oral traditions, continue to give us some idea of the significance that these particular spots had to our ancestors.

Beginning in the early 1830s, the Trail of Tears forcibly separated many of our Choctaw ancestors from their sacred Homeland and brought them to what is now southeastern Oklahoma. Accounts written at the time period describe weeping Choctaws touching the trees and telling them goodbye as they set out on the Trail. Once in their new land, they immediately began establishing connections with the landscape and naming its features, just as they had done in Mississippi.

Many of these Oklahoma Choctaw place names are still the official names used today. Those of us living here say some of these names all the time, whether or not we even realize that when we do we are speaking little bits of the Choctaw language that connect us with a deep heritage on the land. What follows is a list of a few of these places, with literal English translations of their Choctaw names and when possible, brief histories of how they came to be



**A pier stone foundation and bits of broken porcelain are all that remain of this 1880's log structure that stood at the old town of Tuskahoma.**

so named.

### *The State*

The first Choctaw name that we must mention is "Oklahoma" itself. Following the Civil War, delegates from the Five Civilized Tribes traveled to Washington, D.C., to resume formal relationships with the U.S. government. During the meeting, federal officials proposed the creation of an Indian Territory. Choctaw delegate Rev. Allen Wright suggested naming it "Oklahumma" (Meserve 1941:319). In the Choctaw language "okla" means "people" and "humma" means "red." Thus, the area

would be named Oklahoma Territory, or literally "Territory of the Red People." Today "The State of Oklahoma" literally means "The state belonging to Red People."

### *Choctaw County*

This county derives its name from the Choctaw or "Chahta" people. However, some disagreement exists about how we came to be called "Chahta" in the first place. According to some Choctaw oral traditions, "Chahta" was the name of the man who led the Choctaw people to the Mississippi Homeland and subsequently gave his name to the tribe. Conversely, Henry Halbert, an early scholar and fluent Choctaw speaker suggested that the name may have come from the Choctaw term "hvcha hattak," meaning "river people." He felt this referred to ancient Choctaw towns located on the Tombigbee River in western Alabama. Some anthropologists believe the name "Chahta" comes from the Spanish word, "chato," meaning "flat." Early Choctaws are known to have sometimes slightly flattened the top of their children's heads for aesthetic and probably spiritual reasons. In reality, the origin of the word "Choctaw" is an important question for which a consensus may never be reached.

### *Atoka County*

The name of Atoka County itself is Choctaw in origin. The county was named after Capt. Atoka, a Choctaw warrior who

signed the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek and was well known for his prowess in stickball. His name probably came from the word "Hitoka," or "Stickball-Playing Field" (Wright 1930:330). The Atoka Agreement was signed near to town of Atoka on April 23, 1897. This agreement set up the dissolution of the Choctaw Tribal government and the allotment of lands to Choctaw families under the Dawes Commission.

South of the town of Atoka on Hwy 69, is the town of Tushka. Its name comes from the Choctaw word "tvshka" or "warrior." Tushka is an old railroad town that was originally called "Peck Switch." This name was shortened to "Peck," and then changed to "Lewis." Later, the railroad wanted to change the town's name to "Dayton," but the Post Office Department argued that there were already too many towns named Dayton, and so in 1909 a more unique Choctaw name "Tushka" was chosen (Fugate and Fugate 1991:59).

## ***Bryan County***

In Bryan County, east of Durant, is the town of Bokchito. This town's name, which can be translated as "large stream," comes from the Choctaw words "bok," meaning "river" or "stream," and "chito" meaning "big." The stream flowing immediately east of the town has the same name. Armstrong Academy, located a couple miles from the present town of Bokchito, was opened in 1845. Its campus, renamed "Chahta Tamaha" (meaning "Choctaw Town"), served as the capital of the Choctaw Nation from 1863-1883 (Fugate and Fugate 1991:195-106).

## ***Pushmataha County***

Pushmataha County is named after one of the most influential Choctaw chiefs of all time. Coming from Oklahannali, the southernmost of the three Choctaw Districts in Mississippi, Pushmataha (1764? -1824) served as a district chief from 1800-1824. He helped the Choctaw tribe becoming a strong ally of the United States, while opposing Removal. Pushmataha's name probably comes from the Choctaw phrase "apushi mvt taha," meaning literally "early childhood is gone." This name may have been given because when asked of his ancestry, Pushmataha said he had no parents, but simply came forth from a tree in a cloud of smoke when lightning struck it.

Tuskahoma is a small town whose name comes from the compounding of the Choctaw words "tvshka" meaning "warrior" and "humma" meaning "red." Its name literally means "red warrior." The town site has moved several times. One of its earlier locations was around the Choctaw Council house built in 1884. Today this building serves as the tribal museum and the focal point of the annual Choctaw Labor Day Festival.

Nanah Waiya Lake is located just west of Tuskahoma on Hwy. 271. In the Choctaw language "Nvnih Waiya" means "bending / leaning hill." The lake is named after the old town of Nanah Waiya, which was located nearby. Nanah Waiya served as the Capitol of the Choctaw Nation from 1834-1850. This town itself was named after Nvnih Waiya, Miss., described as the birthplace of the Choctaw people in oral history.

About nine miles south of the Tushka Homma Council House is the town of Nashoba. Its name means, "wolf" in the Choctaw language. The town derives its name from a no-longer existent county that was a part of Choctaw Nation before statehood. This county was itself named after Neshoba County, Miss., where many

of the area's inhabitants had lived before the Trail of Tears (Wright 1930:321).

The town of Kosoma is located about seven miles north of Antlers. Its name means "acid-smelling" in the Choctaw language. Some hypothesize that this name may have been given as the result of the town being located near a swamp, or because it was located in goat-ranching country.

## ***McCurtain County***

Bokhoma is located in the southeastern part of the county. Its name translates as "red river," coming from a combination of the Choctaw words "bok" or "stream" and "humma," or red. The town of Idabel originally had the same name.

The community of Lukfata is located just west of Broken Bow. Its name is created from a combination of the Choctaw words "lukfi" or "dirt" and "hvta" meaning "light-colored." Some local residents translate its name as "white clay." A stream located nearby has the same name.

Panki Bok is an old Choctaw town located southeast of Eagle-town. Its name, meaning "grape stream," probably suggests one of the types of food that could be gathered on its banks.

Three miles south of Smithville is the town of Nani-chito. Its name may come from the Choctaw phrase "nvnih chito," meaning "big hill."

Alikchi is located northwest of Wright City. The town's name is the Choctaw word for "doctor." It was so named due to its close proximity to a sulfur spring that was used for medicine by Choctaw people (Shirk 1987: 7).

Kullituklo is located southeast of Idabel. Its name may be translated as "two springs," deriving from the Choctaw words "kulli" meaning "spring" and "tuklo" meaning "two."

Several streams in McCurtain County have Choctaw names. The Yalobasha River gets its name from the Choctaw words "yalubba," meaning "tadpoles" and "asha" meaning "reside." Its name, translated into English as "tadpoles are in it," strongly suggests a type of wildlife that was/is common in its waters. The name of Bok Tuklo Creek may be translated as "two streams creek." The name for Yanabi Creek may derive from "iyanabi" the Choctaw name for the ironwood tree, or it may be a compound of the Choctaw words "yvnnvsh" and "vbi," meaning "buffalo kill."

## ***Leftore County***

Talihina was founded as a railroad town, and it derives its name from the Choctaw words "tvli" meaning rock or metal and "hina" meaning road. When combined, these words are translated as "railroad." The first Talihina Indian Hospital was built by the Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations in 1917.

Skullyville is located north of Poteau and was one of the first Choctaw towns established in Oklahoma. Its cemetery is the resting place for a number of Choctaw Trail of Tears survivors. The Choctaw Agency was located in Skullyville. "Skully" comes from the Choctaw word "iskulli" meaning "money" (This was itself borrowed from a Spanish word for a type of coin "scallion"). The town's name literally means "Moneyville." This was given because it was here that Choctaw residents of the Moshulatubbee District received annuities from the Agency (Wright 1930:318).

Pocola is located north of Poteau. Its name is a corruption of the Choctaw word "pokoli" meaning ten. It was thus named because the town is roughly 10 miles southwest from the old part of Fort

Smith.

Bokoshe is located in the western part of the county. Its name comes from the Choctaw words “bok” meaning “stream” and “ushi” meaning “little.” It may be translated as “creek” or “little creek.”

### ***Haskell County***

Tamaha, located northeast of Stigler and immediately south of the Canadian River, was a site of a Choctaw settlement in the 1830s. Originally called “Pleasant Bluff,” it was re-named Tamaha in 1884, after the Choctaw word “tvmaha,” meaning town. Interestingly, the adjacent section of the Canadian River is the site of the furthest inland naval battle of the Civil War. Here on June 15, 1864, Cherokee Confederate General Stand Watie captured the union Boat J.R. Williams (Fugate and Fugate 1991:71).

Kinta, is a railroad town located in the southern part of the county, founded during the era of Chief Green McCurtain. Its name translates as “beaver.”

### ***Latimer County***

Yanush is located approximately five miles northwest of Tushka Homma Council House. Its name comes from the Choctaw word “yvnnvsh,” meaning buffalo. It is likely that buffalo could be found in the area when Choctaw settlers first arrived.

Panola, located east of Wilburton, derives its name from the Choctaw word “pinola,” meaning cotton.

The Choctaw-named places we’ve just described are only a few of many in southeastern Oklahoma. In traditional Choctaw thought,

a certain amount of power exists in being able to name someone or something. These Choctaw names have the power of permanently tying the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma to the landscape of Oklahoma. If we think of the literal meaning of their Choctaw names the next time we speak of these places or visit them, the names will also help connect us with our ancestors and the special relationship that they had with the very land that we walk on.

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