

Choctaw resistance to removal from ancient homeland

Last month began a four-part Iti Fabvssa series examining ways the Choctaw people resisted Removal

Editor's Note: This month's Iti Fabvssa is part two in a four-part installment.

and the Trail of Tears. In this month's Iti Fabvssa the focus is on Choctaw resistance to the Dancing Rabbit Creek Treaty, an agreement ceding the last part of the Choctaw homeland to the United States government, and for many families, set the stage for the Trail of Tears and Removal to Indian Territory.

Between 1801 and 1825, the Choctaw Nation ceded 34,000 square miles of land to the United States through a series of seven treaties. Despite the solemn assurance given by treaty negotiator Andrew Jackson in 1820 that the United States would never again seek Choctaw lands, just ten years later a commission formed by Andrew Jackson himself (by then president of the United States) entered Choctaw Nation. The purpose of this commission was to negotiate not just a land cession treaty, but a treaty that would transfer all of the remaining 17,000 square miles of the Choctaw homeland in Mississippi to the United States and set up Choctaw Removal to the west. The Choctaw people resisted this treaty and, by extension, Removal itself, in the form of three overwhelming "no" votes, hundreds of walk-outs, and a butcher knife.

The United States commissioners Major John H. Eaton and Colonel John Coffee arranged to meet with Choctaw leaders and several thousand Choctaw citizens at a place in the Choctaw homeland called Chukfi ahihla bok "Dancing Rabbit Creek" in mid-September 1830 to discuss the treaty. On September 22, after some days of preparations and talks, the assembled Choctaw council requested that the Commission formally present the terms of the proposed treaty to an assembled body of Choctaw leaders and citizens. After the

articles of the treaty were read and translated to the Choctaw assembly, the United States

Commissioners immediately asked a Choctaw man named Killihota to speak to those present. Killihota stood up from the Choctaw council, gave an obviously exaggerated account of the lands to the west, and spoke in favor of Removing to Indian Territory. When he finished, an elder Choctaw woman sitting at the center of the Choctaw council stood up with a butcher knife, and told Killihota that if she were to cut his chest open with that knife, she would expose two hearts. By this, of course, she was accusing him of having divided loyalties. Choctaw opposition to the proposed treaty was overwhelming. When a vote was taken at the end of the day, Killihota was the only Choctaw in the 60-plus member council that was in favor of the treaty.

The following day, a Choctaw committee formally told the Commissioners that there would be no negotiations on Removal. One of the Commissioners, Major Eaton, then arose and in no uncertain terms, told the Choctaw representatives that if they refused, the state of Mississippi would seize their lands, that the United States military outnumbering the Choctaw by 100 or 1,000 to 1 would move in and destroy any resistance, that all remaining Choctaw land would be taken by force, and that the Choctaw who survived would be moved to the west.

After this speech, the second U.S. Commissioner, Colonel Coffee, sickened by the threats, indicated that he would have no part in such negotiations. Many Choctaws had a similar view, and left the council grounds over the next several days. In their minds, leaving the council grounds was a strong statement declining the treaty. There would be no agreement.



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When treaty negotiations failed and Choctaws quickly left the council

grounds, the U.S. commissioners became desperate. On September 24, they approached Choctaw Chief Greenwood LeFlore to help them find a way to get the treaty approved. LeFlore agreed, on the condition that several alterations be made to the treaty, including adding a provision Choctaw people, who so desired, be given land allotments in Mississippi and become joint citizens of the Choctaw Nation and the United States (Article 14).

The following day, the new treaty document was read and translated to the Choctaw people who remained at the council ground. As the stipulations were being read, the Choctaw group talked loudly among themselves, indicating they had no intention of signing it. Later that day, the Commissioners attempted to negotiate the Treaty with only Greenwood LeFlore's district. Even within LeFlore's own district, where the pro-Removal Chief had a great deal of influence, the treaty was voted down by a two-thirds majority. Those who voted against it then went home, believing that negotiations were concluded.

On September 27, the Commissioners again met with the Choctaw representatives who remained on the Council grounds. The Choctaw leaders announced to the Commission that it was their unanimous decision to reject the proposed treaty.

Thereafter, Major Eaton again addressed the remaining Choctaws, telling them that if the treaty was rejected, the United States would cease to have any relations with the Choctaw government. Lands obtained by the Choctaw Nation through previous treaties would be given away to other Tribes, Choctaws would be forced into conscripted

labor and military service, forced to pay taxes to the state, that their children would be destitute, and that the Choctaw people would be utterly destroyed.

After this speech, out of fear, coercion, and false hope that Article 14 of the treaty would be honored, and without the final draft of the treaty even having been read to them, or translated, the Choctaw leaders still present signed the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, against the unanimous wishes of the Choctaw people. Violence and turmoil erupted at the council grounds.

Note –The above account of treaty negotiations is excerpted from Halbert 1902.