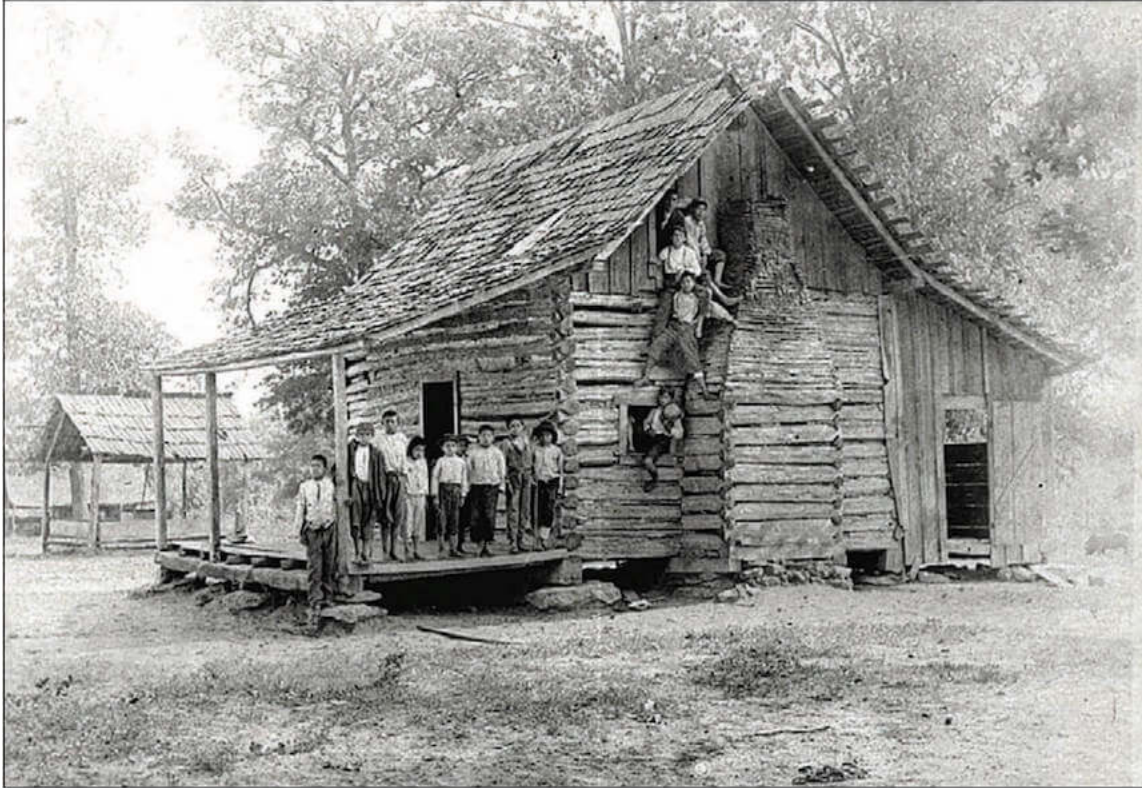


## The Log Cabin



**An 1830's-40's cabin at Goodland Academy with a mudcat chimney, Choctaw County, built by Henry Leavenworth Gooding and Choctaw workers. Image courtesy of Goodland Academy.**

No building style is more iconic of Americana than the log cabin. In many regions, including Choctaw Nation, log cabins are the oldest standing buildings. There is just something special about the way that an old log cabin combines nostalgia with skilled hand craftsmanship, and about how its construction from local, natural materials makes a cabin seem to literally be a part of the land itself. This month, we will take a look at this classic American icon, from a Choctaw perspective.

From what we see and hear, it would be easy to think that log cabins are a uniquely American invention, built by the first European settlers in what is now the United States, but actually, neither of these notions is correct. The first Euro-American houses of the Spanish in Florida (late 1500s), and by the English in New England (first decade of the 1600s) were of a timber frame construction, following the building traditions of those two ethnic groups. The log cabin, however, originated in Scandinavia and was brought to the English Colonies by Scandinavian settlers before 1640. Beautiful, strong, and made from large logs, which were then plentiful in

America's old growth forests, the log cabin quickly caught on in what is now the United States in frontier areas where sawn lumber was difficult to come by.

For Choctaws, home construction with logs was nothing new. Choctaw ancestors had used small-diameter logs, set vertically in a trench to form the core of the walls of winter houses for centuries, while giant logs were used as roof supports (see Iti Fabvssa 4/11/15). However, the rectangular log cabin with horizontal logs seems to have come to the Choctaw homeland after the area passed from the colonial claims of Spain, France, and England, to the United States, shortly after the American Revolutionary War. Choctaws would have first seen these log cabins as ever-increasing numbers of Euro-Americans pushed into the area and began settling along the Tombigbee River and Mississippi River. Choctaws called these log cabins "Chuka Itabana" (Byington 1915:110). This name, which literally means "house fit together" in the Choctaw language, refers to the intricate way that the ends of the logs were notched and assembled to create the main part of the house.

In the early 1800s, log cabins moved from the peripheries of Choctaw country into the center as Euro-Americans began building log churches, schools, and governmental buildings in and amongst Choctaw settlements. Choctaws began building and living in these log cabins too, as they moved out of the ancient villages in order to practice EuroAmerican-style farming, or to set up inns along major routes of transportation, like the Robinson Road. By the time of the Trail of Tears, few or none of the ancient, circular Choctaw winter houses were being built, instead, it was the rectangular log cabin. Henry Halbert (n.d.) describes a type of cabin that was used by some Choctaws in Mississippi around this time. It was rectangular in shape, and its logs were round, notched at their ends to fit together. Its roof was made of logs, oriented with the long axis of the cabin, with the top log serving as a ridge pole for the roof. The spaces between the logs in the roof and walls were mortared. Long boards were scored at their centers and bent over the ridge of the roof with enough hanging over the sides to create eaves. For warmth, a fire was made of dry wood in the middle of the dirt floor. This cabin style (Figure 1) was used by some Choctaws in Mississippi until the 1850s.

When many Choctaw people arrived in what is now Oklahoma on the initial wave of the Trail of Tears, nearly all of them constructed log cabins as their first homes. Initially, most of these cabins were not fancy, but built quickly as immediate shelter for families arriving in a new place. These quick structures were made from relatively small diameter, round logs, cut green, and notched near their ends so that they could be stacked up to form a square pen. Due to the fact that the longer a log is, the heavier and more difficult it is to move, these homes averaged about 16 feet by 16 feet. Often, they had dirt floors, with storage pits dug into them. Split pieces of wood, moss, or rocks were wedged into the spaces between the logs of the walls and coated with a clay chinking called "chuka isht vlhpolosa" in the Choctaw language (Byington 1915:110). Doors were made of split pieces of wood, or even deer hide. Windows, if they existed, were cut into the log walls. They had no screens and maybe no glass, but wooden shutters were made to close them off when needed. Many of these cabins had a loft, where the children slept under roofs ("chuka isht holmo" in the Choctaw language [ibid]) made of pole rafters and covered with split wood shingles (Figure 2). Some of these houses had fireplaces

lined with stones, and “mudcat” chimneys that were made of a log framework, plastered with clay. These houses were put up in a short time with the aid of family members, friends, and congregation members, through an event known as a cabin raising or “chuka itabvnni” in the Choctaw language (ibid., also see Iti Fabvssa 12/13/14). Construction tools were very simple, and these builders may or may not have had the use of animal power.

Over the first year or two, the green logs of these cabins would dry and shrink, creating gaps in the chinking and roofs. In the winter time, these houses could be cold, drafty, and dark. Although they were really temporary structures, some families were content or were forced by circumstances to keep living in them until the buildings finally caught fire within their mudcat chimneys, or rotted from the bottom up as a result of not having a foundation.

Families would often build the temporary log cabins while they took their time building a more substantial and comfortable log home. This type of structure is represented by most of the log cabins from the early days that still survive into the present, such as the Thomas LeFlore Cabin, which was built in Choctaw County in 1834, under contract by the United States government as a stipulation of the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek. Rather than being made from round logs, this type of home is made from hewn logs. These logs came from large-diameter trees that were felled in the late fall, when the sap was low. In southeastern Oklahoma, pine and oak were favorite woods for cabins, but other types were used when convenient. During the winter months, while the felled trees were still green and relatively soft, workers would use a broad axe to remove material on two opposite faces of the logs, leaving the logs with two thin, round, natural sides, and two flat-hewn sides. Hewing logs was an important skill for many Choctaw men, doubly so when the railroads, which required large numbers of hewn timbers for crossties, began to enter Choctaw Nation in the 1860s. For homes, the hewn logs were worth the extra work. Compared to round logs, the hewn logs made homes that were more resistant to rot (because of their shape and greater percentage of heartwood), and more even in their dimensions (McRaven 2005). Both of these characteristics made for houses that were less prone to drafts, stronger, and more comfortable.

If possible, once the green logs were hewn, they would have been stacked and allowed to cure for approximately a year before being assembled into a cabin. In the meantime, a foundation made of pier stones (“chuka aiontvla”, [Byington 1915:110]) would be stacked up to support the corners of the house, the porch, and at certain places along the sill logs. Sheet metal, if available, would be placed between the pier stones and the bottom log, or “sill,” to act as a barrier to termites and moisture. Mortises would be cut into the sill logs to hold flooring joists, up off the ground and away from rot. Floors made of thick-sawn lumber, would be built on top of these. The ends of the hewn wall logs would be expertly notched by a skilled craftsman to fit together snugly to form the shell of the house. Some Choctaw log home builders used the half dovetail and the V-notch, which were the best techniques, while others used the simpler but weaker square notch or half notch (Figure 3). Just as in constructing the temporary houses, the logs for the permanent houses would be set in place by work crews, in a day or perhaps more of community activity and fun. As the walls grew in height, ramps would be set up to help men and animals pull the logs up to the top of the walls. These more permanent cabins often had a

second story or half story above the first. The most common method for building a large house from logs of a finite length was to construct two square log pens and connect them together, creating a type of cabin known as a “dogtrot”. The space in between the two pens in a dog trot was floored and roofed, but left without front or back walls in order to form a breezeway (passive air-conditioning). In nice weather, the breezeway is where the family would eat. It was common to build a one or two story porch on the front and additional rooms onto the back of the home. The Choctaw homestead usually has other buildings besides just the house, including a smoke house, barn, and cellar. These were often, although not always constructed from round logs.

Hewn log homes were built in southeastern Oklahoma until at least the first decade of the 1900s (c.f. Bays 2014). These houses were not only made to last 200 years or more, but to adapt as family needs changed through time. If a family living in a single pen home grew, they could build a second pen and make it into a dog trot, build another story, or add on more rooms elsewhere. Logs were replaced, recycled, and given second life in new structures including barns. As time passed and styles changed, many of the old log homes were eventually sided over.

Today, log homes still have an appeal to many Americans including many Native Americans. Kits with milled round lumber are popular, but somehow they seem to fall short of what our great-grandparents achieved: simple houses, made from local materials, crafted with skill and put together by the hands of the community. Their old log homes that still stand are a testament to them and to the self-reliant way of life that they knew.

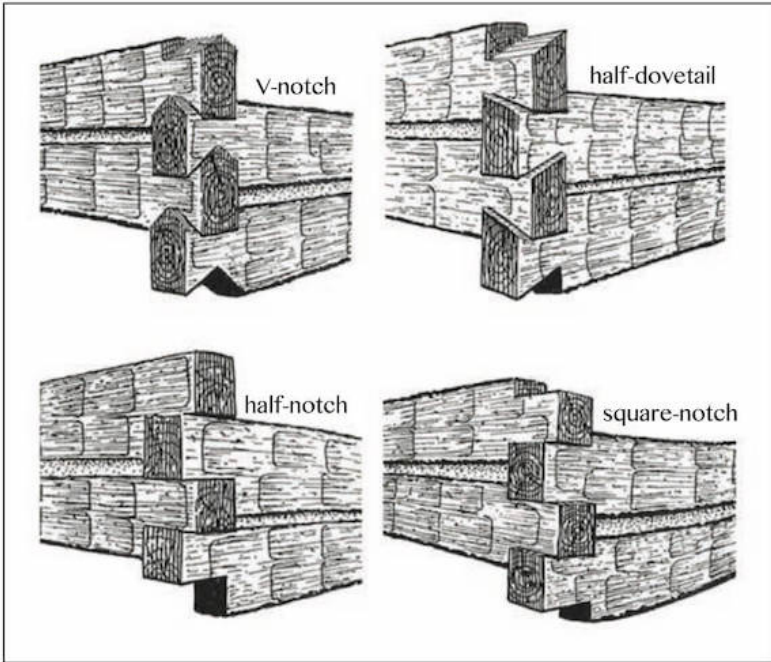
The Historic Preservation Department is currently trying to locate and document early log buildings within the Choctaw Nation. If you have one, please give us a call at 1-800-522-6170 ext. 2236.



**Figure 1: A temporary Choctaw log cabin, Louisiana 1869, painting by Francois Bernard.**



**Figure 2: Upstairs in the Choate Cabin, Pittsburg County 1867.**



**Figure 3: Hewn log notching styles commonly used in the Choctaw Nation (after McRaven 2005).**