

Chahta Nan Ikhvna: Choctaw Education

This month's edition of Iti Fabvssa is about the Choctaw education. We, as Choctaw people, have placed value in learning since time immemorial.

From interactions with family and the community, to sharing stories and experiences we pass down knowledge to our future generations, thus preserving our unique identity as Choctaw people.

However, as with all cultures, we adapt and change in order to perpetuate our way of life. This natural process is what allows us to sustain our culture as Choctaw people in today's modern world.

Before moving to Oklahoma, and the relocation of many families to other parts of the United States, the majority of Choctaw people lived in communities located in our homelands of Mississippi and Alabama.

Throughout daily life infants would be watched by their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers until they reached an age where they could begin to help the community.

Once able to walk, young girls would interact with their mothers and aunts while young boys would interact with their maternal uncles to learn the skills and knowledge necessary for every Choctaw man.

Oral education through storytelling was common within the family and in the community. At the beginning of each community meeting an elder man would recite the full history of that individual community.

Education on Choctaw life was done through immersion, allowing students to learn interactively throughout each day. At night, elders would gather the youth and tell them stories and metaphors to explain the Choctaw world view.

Society began to change as Choctaws interacted with European nations. Trade with these nations brought new ideas and materials into the community. Choctaws quickly adapted to new clothing materials like cloth and wool, metal for tools and knives, and guns for hunting. In return, European nations began trading for our pottery, basketry, spices, horses, animal products, and most importantly food.

Near the end of the 1700s after the civil war between Britain and the American Colonies, the United States replaced the French and Spanish as our primary trade partner. As American expansion grew, so did the relationship between Choctaws and the United States.

Choctaw leadership viewed the United States as a strong partner and accepted our warriors to aid in the War of 1812. However, continued pressure from American settlers and federal agents pushed Choctaw leaders to construct a strategy to ensure the continuation of Choctaw Sovereignty.

Choctaw leaders understood that pressures would continue with the United States. Planning for the future, Choctaw chiefs wanted to educate upcoming generations of Choctaw youth.

In 1818, Choctaw leaders invited a Protestant missionary, Cyrus Kingsbury, into the Choctaw Nation to build schools using funds they had acquired through the 1816 Treaty of Choctaw Trading House.

Elliot Mission was quickly constructed near the Yalobusha River. The school required Choctaw students to move there to attend.

Securing more funding in the Treaty of Doak's Stand, Choctaw leadership asks for more schools to be constructed throughout the nation. By 1824, there were eight schools within the Choctaw Nation and in 1825, the Choctaw Academy in Kentucky was opened as a school for higher learning (Kidwell, 1995). By 1830, four more schools were built within the Choctaw Nation.

Overall, there were 528 students that attended schools, with 278 attending mission schools, and 250 going to day schools within the villages. It is estimated that 4.8 percent of the school age population attended these schools (Kidwell, 1995).

While few Choctaw youth attended school, many that went to the Choctaw Academy came back to become important leaders within the Choctaw community and would later come back to preserve our Choctaw sovereignty.

Today, school is part of everyday life for many Choctaw people. From youth in head start to adults and elders returning to school, we have a long legacy of education that continues today. We go to school to learn about the American world, and we go to our elders, our parents, and our community to learn about the Choctaw world.