

# Iti Fabvssa

## Choctaw Removals

August marks the month that many families prepare for the Labor Day weekend of competitions, cultural activities, and visiting with friends and family. This year will mark 133 years Choctaw people have been gathering at our Capitol Grounds of Tvshka Homma alongside the Old Choctaw Council House, which is currently the Capitol Museum.

This year our Annual Trail of Tears Commemorative Walk was held at Tvshka Homma. Hundreds of Choctaw families came to honor the sacrifice of the many Choctaw people who were forced to move from our homelands.

This month, Iti Fabvssa will look at the many removals that our ancestors endured from 1830 to 1903. We will also take a look at the updated Trail of Tears exhibit that will be featured at the Choctaw Capitol Museum during this year's Labor Day festival.

In 1830, President Andrew Jackson and Congress passed the Indian Removal Act. In the eyes of the American government, this act made it legal for the United States to remove native people from their homelands.

Choctaw leadership understood the threat the United States could pose to the Choctaw people. Hoping to forge a strong alliance with the United States, Choctaw warriors fought alongside Andrew Jackson during the War of 1812 and Choctaw chiefs signed treaties that promised lasting friendship.

Despite this, Andrew Jackson, and many others turned their backs on the Choctaw people and created a system of Indian policy that was meant to disenfranchise native people.

A few months after the Indian Removal Act was passed, our chiefs were forced to sign the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek. Under the threat of destruction, the Choctaw chiefs understood that removal would guarantee the possibility of continued sovereignty for the Choctaw Nation.

Many Choctaw people were upset, having to leave their homes and their families who laid in rest. However, the chiefs secured funds to reestablish the Choctaw Nation government in Indian Territory, primarily focusing on education.

The first removals, from 1831 to 1833, were some of the darkest days in the recorded history of Choctaw people. Over a quarter of the Choctaw people removed during those years passed away from the harshest winters in recorded history.

They died from disease, exposure, "benign" neglect by the federal government, and homicide. Most of the Choctaw people who passed away were our elders and our very young.

This led to not just the loss of much traditional knowledge, but almost a great loss of the next generation. Communities were fractured as families took different routes, causing our traditional Iksa, or clan system, to collapse.

Most Choctaw families did not have the means to transport their family possessions, yet many Choctaw people brought small eating bowls with them that represented their home and their family who rested there.

Soon after the first groups arrived in Indian Territory, the Choctaw chiefs and council re-established the Choctaw government. They passed the Constitution of the Choctaw Nation of 1834 and built a council house at the new capitol, known as Nvnih Waiya, which was named after the Mother Mound of the Choctaw people still standing in Mississippi. From 1835 to 1849 more Choctaw families were removed from Mississippi and from Mobile, Alabama.

In the early 1900s, the United States was trying to remove more Choctaw from Mississippi to Indian Territory to secure land allotments. Despite government funding and preparations, many Choctaw people chose to go with private sponsors or investors, trading some of their land allotments for safe removal to the Choctaw Nation in Oklahoma.

Unfortunately, these arrangements often resulted in the exploitation of Choctaw labor at local farms in Indian Territory and/or confinement until land allotments were secured.

One such instance in the winter of 1902. Seven hundred Choctaws were taken to Ardmore, but the land office did not open until April of 1903. They were kept in unheated warehouses with little provisions and many of them grew sick and died. It is unclear where the Choctaw people from this removal ended up.

In 1903, more Choctaw families were brought by train, under the direction of the United States government. They arrived in Atoka, where they were put into a camp. In the following months, many passed away due to disease until they were given land allotments and finally settled near Bennington.

Chief Harkins, in 1831, stated in the Farewell Letter to the American people, "I could cheerfully hope, that those of another age and generation may not feel the effects of those oppressive measures that have been so illiberally dealt out to us; and that peace and happiness may be their reward. Amid the gloom and horrors of the present separation, we are cheered with a hope that ere long we shall reach our destined land, and that nothing short of the basest acts of treachery will ever be able to wrest it from us, and that we may live free".

Today, our people are thriving because of the perseverance and resilience of our ancestors. In an effort to share information with the community, the Tvshka Homma Capitol Museum, Historic Preservation Department, and the Wheelock Academy Historic Site have worked together to create a Choctaw Removal map to display in the Trail of Tears exhibit at the Museum.

It is our hope that this map will help show important landmarks and stories along the many routes our ancestors walked. This upcoming Labor Festival, let us remember our ancestors that sacrificed so that we may thrive as big hearted, humble, and strong Choctaw people today.



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Louisiana Indians Walking Along a Bayou by Alfred Boisseau in 1846.