

## ITI FABVSSA

### **A New Chahta Homeland: A History by the Decade, 1880-1890**

Iti Fabvssa is currently running a series that covers the span of Oklahoma Choctaw history. By examining each decade since the Choctaw government arrived in our new homelands using Choctaw-created documents, we will get a better understanding of Choctaw ancestors' experiences and how they made decisions that have led us into the present. This month, we will cover 1880-1890, an era in which Choctaw Nation worked to maintain sovereignty in the face of the growing influence of non-Choctaws living within the Choctaw Nation.

Throughout the 1880's, the Choctaw Nation faced increasing challenges to upholding our own laws within our lands. Due to the growth of the railroad and mining industries, the non-Choctaw population soon outnumbered Choctaw citizens. This put more pressure on the Choctaw government to innovate new ways to protect their lands. In 1875, Chief Coleman Cole signed into law the office of the National Agent, who would "act as agent for the sale of timber, stone and stone coal, to any railroad company for the construction and repairing of said railroad, within the limits of the nation." Such an individual would help prevent people from going into Choctaw lands on their own and taking all the resources from the community. Choctaw leaders wanted to be sure there was a balance of industrial development and enough resources for the people.

The non-Choctaw citizen population within the Choctaw Nation grew rapidly with the expansion of the railroad and the mining industries. Since the Choctaw Nation wanted to use these industries as modes of economic development, Choctaw officials faced the challenging task of balancing the influx of migrant workers for the coal mines while still managing intruders that did not have permits to be on Choctaw lands. This made the existing permit system more important than ever. In this system, all non-Choctaw citizens were required to hold a permit to live and work within the boundaries of the Choctaw Nation. By this time, miners were the most common workers coming to Choctaw Territory. Mining companies, which were often owned and operated by railroad companies, paid 25 cents per individual per month. This permit fee was usually deducted from each miner's monthly earnings. When miners went on strike in an effort to gain better safety conditions for themselves, mining companies used the Choctaw permit requirement against the miners by stopping the permit payment of striking individuals. By stopping those payments, striking miners were deemed to be intruders to Choctaw Nation and could be removed. To ensure people followed Choctaw laws, Choctaw Nation continued to rely on their Lighthorsemen, the law enforcement in the Nation.

In 1824, General Council passed a law establishing the Lighthorsemen in the homelands. After removal, Choctaws used Lighthorsemen to maintain the law and manage the courts. But Lighthorsemen could only enforce laws regarding Choctaw citizens. Non-Choctaws were handled by the U.S. government. If a non-Choctaw broke a Choctaw law, a U.S. agent would have to come and arrest them. But because of the distance between Choctaw Territory and Arkansas, where U.S. agents were based, the journey took a long time and sometimes US agents would not come at all.

Toward the end of this decade, allotment loomed as a threat to the Choctaw Nation. In 1887, Congress passed the General Allotment Act. Also known as the Dawes Act, the law was developed by Senator Henry L. Dawes. This law would divide up all Indian nations' lands and force individuals to become private property owners. By owning land as private property, this would assimilate Choctaws and other Indigenous people into the U.S. political-economic system and make it easier for non-Natives to take their land. Allotment increasingly became an issue that divided Choctaws. By dividing up land, it would fundamentally disrupt the Choctaw way of life and their form of government. This was part of the very design of the program. For the U.S. government, which increasingly no longer wanted to deal with Indigenous nations but still wanted their lands, allotment would destroy the "tribal way of life." Traditional Choctaws often opposed allotment precisely because it would disrupt Choctaw laws and governance. Choctaws who were familiar with American culture and/or had a business oriented mindset were often pro-allotment. They often saw allotment as an opportunity to advance their own personal riches. Fortunately for Choctaws and the other Five Tribes, the

General Allotment Act did not apply to them. Because of the foresight of their leaders during removal, the Five Tribes' treaties prevented the application of allotment to their territories. But this did not stop the threat of allotment altogether. Congress, the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, and individual settlers pushed for Choctaw and other Five Tribes' lands to be allotted, and the negotiations became a defining feature of the 1890-1900 decade that we will discuss in next month's Iti Fabvssa.

Next month, we will cover the period of 1890-1900 when the Dawes Commission went to Indian Territory to negotiate the possibility of allotment with Choctaw leaders and the results of the allotment process which included the Atoka Agreement and the Curtis Act.

Additional reading resources on this period are available on the Choctaw Nation Cultural Service webpage (<https://choctawnationculture.com/choctaw-culture/additional-resources.aspx>). Follow along with this Iti Fabvssa series in print and online at <https://www.choctawnation.com/history-culture/history/iti-fabvssa>. If you have questions or would like more information on the sources, please contact Megan Baker at [meganb@choctawnation.com](mailto:meganb@choctawnation.com).



*Four members of the Choctaw Lighthorsemen, circa 1928. Seated left to right are Ellis Austin and Stanley Benton. Standing on the left is Peter Conser. Box 1, Otis Leader Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society Research Division.*