

ITI FABVSSA

A New Chahta Homeland: A History by the Decade, 1890-1900

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 be covering 1890-1900, a decade that was dominated by negotiations about Choctaw allotment and U.S. interference in Choctaw governance.

As the Choctaw Nation continued to grow, our financial needs also increased. The royalties and leases from coal mines operating within the Choctaw Nation were a critical source of money. By 1890, the Choctaw government had massive expenses from operating schools, a court system, and the salaries of critical government officials such as attorneys, mining trustees, school superintendents, auditors, delegates to Washington and Lighthorsemen. Increasingly, Choctaw tribal government expenses were paid from funds from mining rather than treaty annuities, which had been the primary sources of funding during Choctaw Nation's early years in Indian Territory. This made the Choctaw government particularly affected by strikes in their coal mines.

In 1894, coal miners working in mines in the Choctaw Nation went on strike to protest the mine owners lowering their wages. These mines, primarily run and operated by non-Choctaw companies, were not under the control of the Choctaw government. In fact, the Choctaw Nation filed multiple lawsuits against the companies and brought issues with them to the Bureau of Indian Affairs for the unauthorized seizure of tribal resources, land, and numerous other issues. Choctaw Nation had difficulty regulating the mines. Worker protection regulations that existed elsewhere in the U.S. did not apply in Indian Territory. Dangerous working conditions combined with lower wages caused miners to strike. Peter Hanraty, who would later become a major labor organizer in Oklahoma politics, was one of the central leaders in these strikes. Strikes became an immediate problem as the mines were not in operation and failed to provide Choctaw Nation with needed funds for operating its government and schools. The miners' work permits allowed them to live in Choctaw Nation only if they worked and followed the laws. Since the striking miners were not working, they became in violation of their work permits and were considered trespassers. This led Chief Wilson Jones to call on the Secretary of Interior to send in federal troops to remove the miners. A handful were removed, and eventually, the strikers went back to work. This nevertheless did not solve miners' problems with working conditions and wages. There was another major strike in 1899, and that was ultimately resolved in 1903. Increasingly, non-citizens challenged Choctaw sovereignty. Since 1870, members of U.S. Congress had continually tried to pass bills that would turn Indian Territory into a U.S. state. The Five Tribes' treaties secured their sovereignty over their lands and protected them. Delegates like Peter Pitchlynn constantly pushed back against such overreaches of U.S. authority by circulating memorials and speaking to officials in Washington D.C. American settlers often saw tribal sovereignty as preventing U.S. companies from operating in new markets and therefore blocking commerce. But this was not the case.

Choctaw citizens traded with Americans outside of Indian Territory and exported major crops like cotton. Coal from Choctaw mines was exported across the country. Nevertheless, U.S. imperialism that drove much of U.S. foreign policy in the 1800s pushed settlers to try to take Indigenous people's lands across the continent and incorporate them into the U.S. By 1890, Indian Territory was seen as one of the last frontiers where land had not been claimed by U.S. settlers. This desire for open access to Indian Territory's lands and markets was a key motivation for the U.S.'s push for allotment among the Five Tribes. Although Choctaws and the rest of the Five Tribes were exempt from the 1887 General Allotment Act, that did not stop Congress from pressuring them with allotment.

In 1893, Congress used the annual appropriation bill that allocated money to Indigenous nations to sneak in an authorization for the President to create a three-person commission to negotiate with the Five Tribes regarding "the extinguishment of the national or tribal title" of their lands. Known as the Commission of the Five Tribes, they were led by Henry Dawes, the author of the 1887 General Allotment Act. This commission, later known as the Dawes Commission, was sent to Indian Territory to negotiate allotment with the Five Tribes. After receiving notice of the creation of the commission and an upcoming visit, Choctaw citizens and leaders gathered to discuss the possibility of allotment. The majority opposed the proposed allotment plan. After a March 1894 special session, General Council passed a resolution stating that Choctaw Nation did not consent to any changes to their lands. As the Dawes Commission traveled throughout Indian Territory, they found that other Five Tribes also opposed allotment and had to return to Washington with no agreements. The Commission visited Choctaw Nation and the Five Tribes again in 1895 but still only found opposition from the governments. While individual citizens and non-citizens were vocal about their desire for allotment, they remained a minority and it became clear that many had personal interests and would benefit financially from allotment.

Despite tribal opposition, the Dawes Commission made a third visit to Indian Territory in 1896 to try and convince the Five Tribes to allot their lands. For this visit, the U.S. Congress had authorized the commission to create citizenship rolls for the Five Tribes. Although the Choctaw Nation had been conducting a census every six years since 1858, the Dawes Commission considered the Choctaw Nation's meticulous records to be inferior. Examination of those surviving records has proven otherwise, and they are, in fact, some of the most comprehensive tribally maintained records. The Commission arrived in Choctaw Nation after advertising the creation of their citizenship rolls and began creating new citizenship rolls.

Citizenship rolls became increasingly important throughout this period because they determined whom the Choctaw government had the authority to govern. Choctaw citizenship rolls and the prospect of allotment got the attention of non-Choctaw settlers, who saw it as an opportunity for them to acquire land at the expense of Choctaw citizens who had already lost their ancestral homelands. Although such non-Choctaw intruders often came into Choctaw Nation and were removed when federal authorities upheld their treaty obligations, many came during this period and tried to enroll as Choctaw citizens. It became the responsibility of the Choctaw National Attorney to fight these fraudulent cases in court to prevent their inclusion on Choctaw citizen rolls. This battle against fraud would continue throughout the rest of the allotment period and come at a great financial cost for Choctaw Nation.

In 1896, the Choctaw Nation held a highly contested election in which Green McCurtain, a pro-allotment candidate, won. Responding to hostile U.S. legislation being passed that tried to allot the Five Tribes lands without their consent, Choctaw leaders decided to get ahead of the issue by setting the terms of Choctaw allotment. Under continued pressure from the Dawes Commission, Choctaw and Chickasaw delegates signed the Atoka Agreement on April 23, 1897. Since the Treaty of 1855 made it so that the Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations jointly held title to their lands, they signed the agreement together. It was ratified by Choctaw General Council and then passed into U.S. law as the 1898 Curtis Act. The Curtis Act applied allotment to all the Five Tribes. With this law in place, the Dawes Commission could begin the allotment process in earnest. As part of the allotment process, General Council created a three-person commission to accompany and assist in creating a roll of Choctaw citizens in 1899. One commissioner would represent each district and would ensure that orphans and those otherwise unable to represent themselves would be placed on the rolls.

Next month, we will cover the period of 1900-1910, which includes more on the allotment process, Oklahoma statehood and U.S. interference with Choctaw government that greatly limited its ability to operate as a formal government.

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.



Choctaws and Chickasaws register for their land allotments with the Dawes Commission in a railroad car. Image circa 1900 and courtesy of the W.P. Chaney Photo Collection, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries.