

ITI FABVSSA

A New Chahta Homeland: A History by the Decade, 1900-1910 (Part I)

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 gain a better understanding of Choctaw ancestors' experiences and how they made decisions that have led us into the present. Given the importance of the events of this decade, we have split the 1900-1910 period into two articles. This month, we will be covering 1900-1905, a tumultuous time in which Choctaws were preoccupied with the creation of citizen rolls and allotments.

Despite years of fighting against the division of their lands, Choctaws were ultimately forced to accept allotment with the passage of the Atoka Agreement. Allotment, a method of dispossession of Indigenous peoples of their lands, would completely transform Choctaw society. For thousands of generations, Choctaws communally owned our lands; with allotment, it became easier to take Choctaw lands from Choctaw people. Since the Choctaw and Chickasaws were brought together by their 1855 treaty, both nations had to approve the agreement. In 1898, Choctaw and Chickasaw voters ratified the Atoka Agreement, which outlined the procedure for how their lands would be allotted. Components of the Atoka Agreement were then integrated into federal legislation called the Curtis Act, an extension of the 1887 General Allotment Act, from which the Five Tribes were originally excluded. Quickly after the agreement's approval, the U.S. Dawes commission began taking applications to enroll Choctaws. The Dawes Commission was made up of U.S. officials, lawyers and numerous clerks. A notable figure who was part of the enrollment process was Grant Foreman, who later became one of Oklahoma's most well-known historians of the Five Tribes. The rolls that they created were later called the Dawes Rolls; these same rolls are the basis for enrollment in the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma today. To enroll and become eligible for an allotment, individuals had to travel to where the Dawes Commission had set up camp and appear for an interview. The Dawes Commission set up its Choctaw enrollment office in Atoka but also traveled to various sites to enroll those who could not travel that far.

Families traveled from all over to enroll. Individuals would be cross-referenced with existing Choctaw Nation census and roll records; if they did not appear on rolls created by Choctaw Nation, the commission took testimony from other Choctaws regarding the individual in question. While Choctaw government officials did their best to alert Choctaw community members about allotment, some individuals were not able to come in person. This forced the Dawes Commission to spend considerable time and money locating Choctaws who were on the government rolls but had not appeared before the Dawes Commission. Often people changed their names or had since passed away, which added to the confusion.

The unique nature of the original 1830 Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek and their later 1855 treaty with the Chickasaws made their allotment process more complicated than that of the

other Five Tribes. One important treaty provision was regarding the Choctaws living in Mississippi, who were eligible for allotments in present-day Oklahoma. To uphold this provision, the Dawes Commission traveled to Mississippi to enroll Choctaws there. In order to receive their allotment in Choctaw Territory, the Mississippi Choctaw would have to relocate to present-day Oklahoma before the Dawes rolls were closed. This spurred the last wave of Choctaw removal from our homelands from 1902-1903. One major problem was that many of these Mississippi Choctaws did not have the money to move to Indian Territory on their own. Given that many of these Choctaws did not know English, this made them vulnerable to land speculators who offered money for transportation to Indian Territory in exchange for half of their allotted lands. A group of Mississippi Choctaws was also targeted by an attorney who sought to sell Choctaws into slavery. This history of these Mississippi Choctaws' experiences during this period is explained in greater detail in the December 2017 Iti Fabvssa titled "Last Choctaw Removal to Ardmore." Additionally, some of the people who the Dawes Commission listed as "Mississippi Choctaw" on the rolls actually came from communities in Louisiana.

Throughout this period, the Dawes Commission was plagued by fraudulent applications. When many of these fraudulent citizens were denied, they would appeal to the U.S. courts to overturn the decision. Although several of the cases were legitimate and able to appeal the decision and get enrolled successfully, the vast majority of these cases were by people with no real claim to Choctaw citizenship. These people became known as "court citizens." To keep them off their rolls and stop them from receiving the lands secured by the 1830 treaty for Choctaw people, the U.S. established the Choctaw-Chickasaw Citizenship Court to handle all these cases. Choctaw Nation hired the outside law firm, Mansfield, McMurray and Cornish, to fight those cases. When the Dawes Commission went to Mississippi, they also received a flurry of fraudulent claims by white people who lied to try and receive allotments in Indian Territory.

Although people began applying for allotments in the 1890s, the rolls were not finalized until 1902. These rolls were cross-referenced with Choctaw censuses from previous years and various other rolls created by the Choctaw government. This was by no means an easy task. The Dawes Commission, and their small army of clerks, were constantly swamped with applications. After months of intense work, the Dawes Commission closed the Choctaw citizenship roll in preparation for the allotment of Choctaw lands on September 25, 1902. Now that the Dawes Commission had a list of all Choctaw citizens who registered in time, it had the difficult task of assigning lands to individuals before them. But before that could begin, issues with Choctaw and Chickasaw enrollment forced the Nations to re-negotiate some of the terms of allotment with the U.S. government; the subsequent agreement would become a major factor in Choctaw Nation's 1902 election.

In October 1902, the Choctaw Principal Chief and Chickasaw Governor ordered a special election regarding the Supplemental Agreement, which clarified some details of the Atoka Agreement. Prior to this election, Choctaw executive committee on the Supplemental Agreement had issued several pamphlets and circular letters on the document, inviting all citizens to make their concerns known to the commission so they could be addressed. In that same election, Choctaws would also vote for the chief. The race between Green McCurtain and

Thomas W. Hunter was highly contested and watched by U.S. officials who worried how the election outcome might affect the ratification of the Supplemental Agreement. This election was highly contested particularly because of court citizens who organized against McCurtain. Although Choctaws did not know it at the time, this would be the last time they voted for their chief and had their full government until 1975. After the U.S. government cleared accusations of election fraud, Green McCurtain was declared the principal chief.

Chief Green McCurtain, who originally opposed allotment early in his career, became an advocate for allotment, ultimately putting his signature on all Choctaw and Chickasaw allotment patents. Like generations of Choctaw leaders before him, McCurtain was faced with a difficult choice. He the calculated decision to accept allotment so the Choctaw Nation would have a greater say in how allotment was instituted. This choice continues to affect Choctaw families today, particularly those who still hold their families' original allotted land. With the Supplementary Agreement passed and a new chief elected, the process to divide up Choctaw lands could really begin. Choctaw allotments averaged 320-acres plots depending on the value of the land, while Freedmen received considerably small plots. The coal, asphalt and timberlands were not included in the lands divided up for allotment. These lands would be collectively sold to the highest bidder at a later date; their sale would become increasingly important throughout the mid-1900s.

In 1905, representatives from the Five Tribes met to develop a plan to create their own state. Representatives met at Muskogee and drafted a constitution for an Indian-run state known as the State of Sequoyah. If admitted by the U.S., this state would have been the 46th state and would have been a successor to the governments of the Five Tribes, which U.S. Congress was planning to disestablish altogether. Notably, the proposed State of Sequoyah would not have been a confederacy of tribes, but the tribes would have been disestablished altogether in order to conform to the U.S. system. This proposal was sent to U.S. Congress, but President Theodore Roosevelt made it known that he preferred that Oklahoma and Indian Territories enter the Union as a single state rather than two. With this, Indian Territory faced a future in which they would be enjoined with Oklahoma Territory. Next month, we will delve into more detail regarding statehood and its impact on Choctaw Nation and its citizens, covering the 1906-1910 period.

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.

1. Letter from Green McCurtain to J.S. King, December 4, 1902, "General Correspondence and records: 1902 (December 1-22)", Green McCurtain Collection, WHC, OU, 10.
<https://digital.libraries.ou.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/gmccurtain/id/466/rec/75>.

2. Letter from D.C. McCurtain to Green McCurtain, September 19, 1902, "General correspondence and records: 1902 (January September)", Green McCurtain Collection, WHC, OU, 8.



Members of the Dawes Commission used mules and buckboards to enroll Choctaws in the more remote areas. Seated are Jacob Homer, the Choctaw interpreter, and W.P. Chaney. Photo courtesy of the W.P. Chaney Collection, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.