Chickasaw Colonization in Oklahoma

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By Blue Clark

When Europeans arrived among the Chickasaws, the tribe was in the last stages of the temple mound culture, similar to the other Indians in the southeastern area of the United States. Although one of the smallest tribes there, the Chickasaws were one of the most warlike. Their preoccupation with war made them a "ferocious nation" to the French who attempted to subdue them. Chickasaw tribal elders held the banner of tribal pride before the youthful warriors of the community, and the tribe repeatedly attacked neighboring tribes as well as European armies sent against them. Relations with their Indian neighbors in culture, organization and beliefs, the Chickasaws were linguistically similar to the Choctaws, leading many anthropologists to believe that the two tribes had in the past been one.

The ancient Chickasaw domain stretched from the Ohio River on the north, to the Gulf of Mexico on the south, along the Mississippi River on the west and overlay western Tennessee and part of Alabama on the east. The Chickasaws commanded the bluffs near Memphis which controlled passage along the Mississippi River, and thus the vital link into the interior of the New World. The strategic importance of the Chickasaw region led several European powers to attempt to align these Indians with their imperial causes. The English were the most successful. The Spanish, British, French and American rivalry for the allegiance of the tribe altered the Chickasaw life style as the Indians became attached to the trade goods carried into their nation. Slowly the tribe's supremacy gave way to the devastating and demoralizing effects of the encroaching American nation.

As the fledgling states within the new republic were formed, their leaders sought to extirpate Indian tribes from their jurisdiction. However, it was a difficult undertaking because Indians comprised separate nations within the states, not subject to state or federal law.

Viewed with suspicion and envy by whites, the Chickasaws had allied with the British during the American Revolution, and successfully checked the American military threat south of the Ohio River. American settlers and speculators regarded the Indians as undervesting of their vast holdings as a result of their support for the British in the contest for American independence. Moreover, they scorned the Chickasaws' religion and their implacable opposition to American intrusion.

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Federal officials reacted to the demands of Americans for more Indian land by attempting to change the Indians into farmers after the white example. Federal agents established a model farm among the Chickasaws in 1802 in an attempt to convert the tribe to a sedentary life more attuned to the American frontier. In settling a dispute with the state of Georgia in 1802, over the title of land that later became portions of the states of Mississippi and Alabama, the Federal government entered into a compact with the state of Georgia which pledged the national government to relinquish Indian title to the lands inside its state boundaries. In 1803 the United States government took possession of the vast domain stretching between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains called the Louisiana Purchase. And in the following year the United States Congress authorized President Thomas Jefferson to negotiate an exchange of Indian lands in the East for lands west of the Mississippi, and thus open the eastern Indian lands to white settlement.

The years 1816-1818 were fateful ones for the Chickasaws, in which corruption and erosion of tribal power finally broke Chickasaw resistance to removal. The first treaty between the Chickasaw nation and the United States in 1818 provided that the Federal government would manage Chickasaw affairs "for the benefit and comfort of the Indians" as it saw fit. President Jefferson, who believed the purposes of the young republic would best be served if the Chickasaws were removed and their eastern lands opened to white settlement, suggested to the Chickasaws in 1825 that they remove to the West. However, they refused to consider the idea, and as a result American pressure on the Chickasaws intensified the disintegration of their aboriginal life style. Traders and frontier merchants dealt in goods that tied Chickasaw tastes to the whites and at the same time reduced the Indians' independence. Missionaries attempted to replace old tribal deities and practices with Christianity, increasing tribal disillusionment and confusion. State and federal officials contributed to tribal decay. In 1826 federal officials established a factory, or trade center. Its purpose was to provide the Indians the necessities, and encourage them to acquire debts "beyond their means of paying" in order to pressure them to cede lands. The plan worked for within three years the Chickasaws owed the Federal government some $12,000, and in order to pay, the Chickasaws ceded all their lands north of the Tennessee River for $12,000.

Land was the key to Chickasaw survival as a tribe. The Indians honored their land, buried their dead and venerated their ancestors in it, drew their names of the clan and social relationships from it and sustained themselves from it. Once their land base was destroyed, they began to lose their strength.
The influx of white settlers depleted the Tombigbee countryside in Mississippi of game, and forced the Chickasaws to turn to farming for food. The men cultivated the fields alongside the women, a blow to their warrior heritage and pride. As the women gradually left their traditional farming for frontier household chores, the Chickasaw clan, dominated by the men who hunted and made war, gave way to a frontier model of family-centered farms, with the men and women adopting the attire of the frontier whites.

Chickasaw culture differed markedly from that of the encroaching Americans. White culture influenced the Chickasaws and contributed to their removal. The concept of private property was one of the new viewpoints introduced to the tribe. Chickasaws loved "living" more than "getting." Their society was not based on private ownership of property and the acquisitiveness required to obtain additional private property. Whites regarded them as lazy for their interest in hunting, tribal rites, games and inattention to what the whites considered important—a private fortune based on money.

The liquor traffic was another cause of concern in Chickasaw society, as warriors indolent and wasted because of consuming white settlements, turned to drink. One missionary summed up the effects of liquor upon the tribe in this manner: "Strong drink has long been the destroyer of this people. Whiskey, that devouring foe, is the god they adore, and after it they heedless go." However, liquor was but one of the forces working on the tribe that would lead it to relinquish its lands.

The object of federal negotiations through these years always remained the land of the Chickasaws. Tribal cessions of Chickasaw lands began with the 1869 Hopewell Treaty which provided for tribal grant of a tract on the Tennessee River for a trading post at Muscle Shoals. This was followed by an agreement in 1861 in which the Chickasaws allowed government surveyors to mark a road through their lands in return for goods valued at $700, and an 1865 treaty which ceded title to all Chickasaw holdings on the south side of the Tennessee River to the west bank of the Tombigbee River.

The mixed-blood aristocracy that arose from intermarriage, largely with traders residing in the Chickasaw nation, was better able to deal with the changes the whites brought than were the full-bloods. The mixed-bloods accommodated to the whites, while the full-bloods withdrew from the harsh realities of the new world around them and sought refuge in old traditions, customs and finally in rum and brandy supplied by the traders. James Logan Colbert, a Scottish trader, had resided in the Chickasaw nation for forty years, and his sons were a powerful influence among the tribe. Full-blood leaders such as aging Piomingo attempted to turn back the
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granted the Chickasaw territory to them for their preservation and use. Their ancestors were buried there, and thus to part with this land was blasphemous. Besides, the only land remaining to the Chickasaws in Mississippi comprised the core of their ancient homeland and their leaders declared that the tribe would never remove from it. This stance involved the Chickasaws in a long and bitter struggle with the state of Mississippi and the Federal government. Hoping to retain their lands and life styles the Chickasaws adopted the ways of the whites. They divided the nation into four districts in 1842 to make way for an emerging judicial system and improved political administration as a response to white pressures. In 1842, mixed-bloods on the Chickasaw council, always in the forefront of change, adopted a code of written laws improving law enforcement, protecting private property and providing for a police force. In addition many tribal members accepted Christianity, turned to farming and adopted white life styles. The Chickasaws hoped that by accommodating themselves to white ways, they could remain in their ancestral homeland. However, the changes that proved so detrimental to tribal values provided no protection. Missionaries, white intruders, state officials and federal agents continued to pressure the Indians to remove. They told the Chickasaws that by going to join their brothers already in the West they would be free of the obvious debilitating influence of the whites, and could retain their old ways. Also the whites assured them that the new land that they chose would be theirs “as long as the grass grows, or water runs,” and by leaving immediately they could forestall the inevitable hardship of eventual forced removal. Federal commissioners pledged that the government would pay the expenses for a comfortable journey west and would feed and clothe the Chickasaws for one year after they arrived in their new home in Indian Territory. As early as 1846 Mississippi had begun the process of extending its laws over the Chickasaws, and between 1848 and 1850 the process was accelerated in an effort to pressure them into leaving. Subjecting the Chickasaws to Mississippi ordinances negated tribal laws forbidding whiskey in the Chickasaw nation, and led to an increase in the liquor traffic. In addition both Alabama and Mississippi during 1849 and 1850 passed statutes which voided Chickasaw government and destroyed the power of the tribal chiefs, and made all Indians subject to state law. Because Indian testimony was barred from state courts and because Chickasaws did not fully understand the intricacies of recently introduced concepts of private property, unscrupulous whites operated profitably among the Indians. Merchants also charged exorbitant prices for goods and then demanded lands as payment. Like the other threatened tribes, the Chickasaws appealed to President

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side of changes overtaking the Chickasaws by urging retention of the old customs, but by also the mixed-bloods controlled the tribe’s affairs. Associating and conversing with ease with the Americans, James Colbert saw to it that the negotiations had to go through his family to obtain audience with the other tribal leaders. And their assistance was handsomely rewarded with gifts or bribes and with closer ties with the powerful whites.

In the prelude to the negotiations for the treaty of 1848 with Major should be paid for their lands exactly what the whites received for theirs. In reply Jackson angrily declared that “these are high toned sentiments for an Indian” and that they must learn that Indians cannot possess sovereignty tribes to the Indian leaders for their cooperation. George Colbert and Tishmanstshbbee each received $2,000 and Chinthche Minko got a $100 annuity for life, while each of the signatory chiefs received from $100 to $150 each. Favored leaders received valued goods, including 200 gallons of whiskey and 1,000 pounds of tobacco. Jackson recalled that for successful negotiations, the agents had to address the Indians and appeal “to their fears and indulge their avarice.”

The commissioners told the Chickasaws that if they did not voluntarily cede their lands for good bargaining now, “Congress will pass a law, authorizing them to take possession” of the land in question without compensation. As a result the Chickasaws agreed to cede all their land north of the southern boundary of Tennessee, for which the tribe received $2,000 per year for fifteen years from the United States government. In negotiating with the Indians from 1840 through 1848, Jackson and other commissioners reduced the Chickasaws to less than 50,000 acres and confined them to small tracts in northern Mississippi and northeastern Alabama.

Still government agents, state officials and intruders tried hard to gain the assent of the tribe to abandon its remaining eastern lands and remove west of the Mississippi River. Already small bands from each of the South- eastern tribes had been removing across the river to retain their old ways of life free from the influence of the whites. Also bands of Chickasaw hunters relocated in the region west of the river for as long as six months before their return to their eastern homeland. In 1845, nearly 200 Chickasaws withdrew permanently and lived a wandering life in the trans-Mississippi West fighting the Osages in wars from 1815 through 1841. By 1846, 100 Chickasaws lived in Louisiana.

Nonetheless, the majority of the tribe resisted and of the Five Civilized Tribes, the Chickasaws were the last to sign a removal agreement and to accept a home in the West. The tribesmen believed that the Great Spirit
Jackson for protection as required by federal treaties in setting aside state laws and in ejecting trespassing whites from their territory. However, Jackson replied that he could do nothing, and the Chickasaws must either face state jurisdiction and extinction, or "remove to a country beyond the Mississippi." Previous treaties and pledges had committed the Federal government to protect the Indians' title to their lands, but Jackson, a frontiersman and Indian-fighter, refused to help. As a result, the states accomplished what the Federal government could not. While Mississippi officials acted with impunity, the Chickasaws lacked any recourse but removal.

During 1830, the year the Indian Removal Act became law and the year that the Cherokees signed a removal treaty, the Chickasaws agreed to discuss removal with federal commissioners. John Eaton and John Coffee, men who negotiated several tribal removals, met the Chickasaw leaders at Franklin, Tennessee, together with President Jackson who attended the council to lend prestige to the federal cause. The Chickasaws demanded the equivalent of $1,000,000 in the form of new lands, cash settlements and 1,500 acre allotments for every man, woman and child. The Franklin agreement finally provided for the cession of the entire Chickasaw homeland in the East in exchange for a western home of the tribe's choosing. Also the United States agreed to pay the cost of removal and to subsidize the Indians for one year after their arrival in the new land. In addition each warrior, widow with a family and white man with a Chickasaw family would receive one-half section or 320 acres of land. Single persons each were to receive one-quarter section of land. These allotments were to be held in fee simple and sold if the grantee emigrated. The United States government agreed to pay the Chickasaw Nation an annuity of $15,000 for twenty years. Whites were ecstatic over the pledge of the Indians to remove, and toasted each other that "the dawn of civilization now beams on its horizon" and "the wilderness shall blossom as the rose."

They neglected the fact that the Treaty of Franklin pledged an exchange of land at the choosing of the Chickasaws, and was voided if the Indians could not locate a suitable country to relocate in. To fulfill the treaty stipulations a Chickasaw exploring party investigated portions of Indian Territory and Mexico in search of a new home. However, the United States government refused to consider the attempt to purchase the Mexican territory for the tribe, and the Chickasaw leaders did not find a suitable area in Indian Territory. Therefore, they did not have to remove according to the terms of the Treaty of Franklin.

During 1832 Commissioner Coffee met with Chickasaw leaders on the council grounds at Pontotoc Creek in Mississippi and used the usual play
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of threatening to withhold their annuity payments until the treaty was signed. Thus, he obtained a new removal treaty—The Treaty of Pontotoc. It provided for the cession of all Chickasaw lands east of the Mississippi River and for the immediate survey of the tribal domain for sale as public land.

While leaders of the tribe again searched the trans-Mississippi region for a new home, each Chickasaw adult received a temporary homestead until he emigrated. Each single man was assigned one section, each family of five or fewer two sections of land and each family of ten or more four sections. Families owning fewer than ten slaves were awarded an additional section of land. The Indians were to receive payment for the improvements on their land allotments. Proceeds from the sale of the Chickasaw land, whether improved homesteads or surplus lands, went into a general fund of the Chickasaw Nation. The Federal government held this money for the tribe, deducting from the fund the expenses of the surveys and sales of the land. From the proceeds of the land sales, the government agreed to advance the Indians the amount needed for removal and for subsistence for one year.

The Chickasaws, in effect, paid for their own removal from the proceeds of the sale of their homeland.

During 1834, tribal leaders obtained amendments to the Pontotoc Treaty. These changes increased the size of allotments, included orphans in the allotments, granted fee simple title to their temporary homesteads, allowed surplus land sales to go into the general tribal fund while proceeds from the sale of homesteads went to individual allottees and created a tribal commission to oversee the land sale negotiations. The staunchest opponent of removal, Levi Colbert, died shortly after the negotiations of the treaty revision, and his death was the signal for renewed pressures for Chickasaw removal to the West.

In the Pontotoc Treaty, the Chickasaws ceded to the United States all their domain of 6,422,490 acres. Temporary homesteads occupied approximately one-third of that area, while the remaining surplus land was sold at auction or public sale. These sales began in early 1836 at a price of about $2.00 an acre; however, the final block of land sold in 1849 for as little as two cents an acre under the graduation principle allowing the less valuable land to be sold for less and less. A Chickasaw tribal commission invented the funds from sales of allotted lands of tribalmen considered incapable of understanding and managing their own affairs in government bonds. Sales of unallotted lands brought some $530,000 into the general fund which was held in trust by the United States government.

The treaty pledged that the Chickasaws would receive a suitable land west of the Mississippi River as their new home, and expeditions repeatedly searched the Indian Territory for a new homeland. Finally on January 17, 1839, Chickasaw leaders concluded an agreement with their cultural kinmen, the Choctaws. Meeting at Doaksville in the Choctaw Nation, the two tribes agreed that the Chickasaws would pay $500,000 to the Choctaws for the central and western portion of the Choctaw nation in southern Indian Territory.

Pressures escalated for the removal of the Chickasaws while the Indians themselves stalled. Whites, flocking into the Chickasaw Nation to obtain land and money from the harassed Indians, exploited and cheated them. Tribal leaders pleaded with the secretary of war to protect the Chickasaws from the self-serving whites and to force "strict compliance with the treaty" or "their ruin is inevitable." A "host of speculators" secured the countryside. James Colbert, a leading Chickasaw, wrote, lying to the hapless Indians, telling them they must sign a blank deed to their property for $500 or less immediately and making promises they never intended to fulfill. "With the exception of the Creek Nation I expect there has never been such frauds imposed on any people as the Chickasaws." He was confident that President Jackson would intercede on behalf of the unfortunate Indians and protect them. He was wrong.

A government observer noted the alarming influx of disreputable whites among the tribesmen presenting "scenes of brutality revolving to every principle of humanity and consequences ultimately to the Indian [which were] truly appalling." Chickasaw chiefs pleaded with the federal officials not to turn the tribe over to removal contractors whose only interest lay in making as much money as possible from the removal process, but to assist the Chickasaws who were "now almost destitute and homeless." Nonetheless, all the pleas of the Indians went unheeded and they fell prey to the relentless removal process.

Symptomatic of the degeneration of the once proud tribe was the death of Emmbby, the principal counselor to the tribal chief and a warrior who served frequently with Jackson in his Indian campaigns. In 1837 a white man confronted Emmbby with his rifle in hand and aimed the weapon at the warrior. Emmbby straightened on the back of his horse and shouted, "Shoot! Emmbby is not afraid to die!" The white man fired and Emmbby toppled dead from his horse. Traditionally, revenge among the Chickasaws was a clan duty, and in the past, warriors relentlessly avenged their fallen brothers. Because of this government agents feared trouble—in fact, they expected it—but the Chickasaws sadly and quietly continued preparations for their departure from their homeland without exacting retribution.

One month after returning from negotiations with the Choctaws at Doaksville, the Chickasaws announced that they were ready to remove. A. M. Upshaw, appointed by the secretary of war as the Superintendent...
of Chickasaw Removal, immediately made arrangements for stockpiling provisions along the proposed emigration route. Specifications called for the daily ration for each emigrating Indian to include one pound of fresh beef or pork, three-fourths pound of salt pork or bacon, three-fourths quart of corn or corn meal or one pound of wheat flour, and four quarts of salt for every one hundred Indians. Each individual ration cost the government eight and one-half cents. In addition, each party of emigrating Chickasaws was assigned a physician, a conductor and a disbursing officer.

Only about 470 Chickasaws responded to Upshaw’s first call for emigrants. Their wagons overflowing with baggage, trailing their slaves, herds of cattle and horses, they departed for their new homes in late July, 1837. Heavy July rains in Arkansas caused the wagons to mire in the deep mud and made nightly camps an unforgettable experience of soggy quarters, wet firewood and miserable conditions. Fever and dysentery extracted its toll, and was blamed by the physician on Indian dissipation rather than on the poor circumstances of travel. Once the road dried, however, the party averaged about thirteen miles a day. Near Little Rock, Arkansas a group of late starting Chickasaws joined the procession and brought the number to nearly 500. There the conductor, John Millard, engaged steamers to transport 175 indigent and ill Indians on the Arkansas River to Fort Coffee, Indian Territory, the next depot for supplies. Most of the Chickasaws who were able to travel vereed from the agreed line of travel to follow their own chosen route toward Fort Towsen, in Indian Territory near the Red River. They suffered greatly during July and August, passing daily to bury those who had perished from the hardships of the “Trail of Tears.” Finally, Millard’s patience gave out as he tried to coax his charges to continue their journey rather than pursuing deer. He threatened to call for troops to spur the Indians onward, and the Chickasaws responded arriving in the Choctaw settlements at Fort Towsen on September 5, 1837.

During the late summer and autumn of 1837 federal officials enrolled 4,000 other Chickasaws, concentrating them in four emigration camps in Alabama and Mississippi. Cautious about the first emigration party’s wandering ways, Upshaw contracted for steamers to transport the Chickasaws to the West in November, 1837, after the Indians had reached Memphis, Tennessee. However, the rumor of the striking of a river boat resulting in the deaths of several hundred Creks caused the Chickasaws to prefer movement by land. Upshaw threatened to withhold Chickasaw annuities but he could persuade only enough Chickasaws to load four boats as most were adamant in their desire to continue their journey on land. While those traveling by boat reached Fort Coffee in eight days, those moving by land took four to six weeks. The heat, mud, swamps, incredible rations, unclean

A river scene characteristic of period when Chickasaws were removed by steamer

conditions, diseases, the long journey and the numerous problems involved in moving such numbers of people horrified many who viewed the spectacle. One observer of the emigration party commented that “money could not compensate for the loss of what I have seen” the Indians endure on their trek.

While only some 500 Chickasaws actually remained in the area east of the Mississippi River after 1838, small bands of them, reluctant to desert their ancestral domain, remained in their eastern homelands into the 1870s. In June, 1838, Lieut of 12th U.S. Infantry, a chief with 130 followers, half of whom were fevered, arrived in the West. The following year 300 emigrated. In 1841 some 145 Indians emigrated, while 1/7 of Chickasaws and 46 slaves traveled West in 1844. The trickle of emigrants continued into 1850, sometimes consisting of a single family. Many times the chiefs and leaders of the tribe returned to their old homeland to extricate widows or orphans stranded there under state law or court decree providing for guardians to “oversee” their possessions.

After Upshaw mistakenly discharged his removal staff in early 1838, thinking his task ended, the Federal government granted a $5,000 payment for each emigrating Indian or slave. Some Chickasaws exploited the use of the general fund and the federal allowance to their own advantage. Some
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of the enterprising returned several times to Mississippi to conduct business or liquidate their holdings under more favorable terms, converted their assets into slaves and received compensation for transporting their slaves to the Fort Coffee depot.

Though the Chickasaws endured their own "Trail of Tears," they did not experience the travails endured by the Cherokees and Creeks on their removals. Federal officials and concerned Indians learned from the earlier disasters and their attendant toll in misery and death. Most Chickasaws left their homeland later than the Cherokee and Creek emigrants, were fewer in number and more easily provisioned. Also they departed earlier in the year and with better preparations.

However, grave difficulties faced the Chickasaws once they arrived in Indian Territory. Bands of Kickapoos, Shawnees, Kiowas and Comanches harassed the new arrivals when they ventured into the western portion of their domain. As a result, most of the Chickasaws remained near the Choctaw towns until the Federal government established Fort Washita in 1835 in the heart of their district to provide protection for them. The first immigrant camps, consisting of tents, were at Eagleton, Dunksville and near Fort Coffee. The fourth camp was on the South Canadian River while a fifth camp was situated on the Clear Boggy River.

Fever and dysentery debilitated the Indians in all their camps, and over 500 Chickasaws and Choctaws died of smallpox. Poor planning on the part of the government agents and callousness on the part of the contractors led to malnutrition and suffering. In addition supplies agreed to by the removal terms and paid for by the Indians were of poor quality and inadequate in volume to meet the emigrants' needs. Collusion among government agents and suppliers led to several scandals. Food hastily deposited for the Indians—with no regard for their arrival—rotted at the depots long before the Chickasaws arrived. Those supplies actually issued were often rotten and damaged, so much so that the Indians' horses refused the spoiled food. Some Chickasaws believed that the spoiled rations were distributed with the intent to "kill them all off." Suppliers short-weighted the Indians and vastly over-charged them for goods as well as for transportation. Major Ethan Allen Hitchcock, the officer in charge of investigating the charges of misadministration and exploitation of the Chickasaws, decried that the government had in effect made the unfortunate Indians the object of a sacrifice for graft, bribes and illicit gain. And a congressional inquiry revealed that the Chickasaw removal, although more humane than that of the Cherokees and others of the Five Civilized Tribes, had cost the Chickasaws $1,500,000. It was nearly fifty years before the tribe received even a
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SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL READINGS
