

## **OUR DOOM IS SEALED: CHOCTAW NATION (1820-1833)**

Like the Chickasaw Nation, the Choctaws resided in Mississippi. Since the 1500s, the Choctaws had been in contact with Europeans who had negotiated with the tribe to take their ancestral land. This included the newly formed U.S. government.

During the 1820s, Andrew Jackson was called on to serve as treaty negotiator for the U.S. with the Choctaws. Jackson had fought alongside Choctaws in the War of 1812 but now worked to obtain their land for white settlement. On a piece of flat, grassy land along the Natchez Trace Road, the Treaty of Doak's Stand was signed in October of 1820. Under this treaty, the Choctaws gave parts of their homeland to the U.S. in exchange for land in Arkansas. This would be the first large-scale removal of an indigenous people from the southeast through Arkansas with disastrous results.

### ***The Treaty of Doak's Stand***

Under the direction of Chief Pushmataha, the Choctaws signed the Treaty of Doak's Stand, the first of two treaties during the removal period of the southeastern tribes. In exchange for land in Mississippi, the Choctaws received land in southern Arkansas near the Red River. The U.S. government agreed to supply them with blankets, kettles, rifles, bullet molds and enough ammunition to hunt and defend themselves for one year after resettlement. While Mississippians rejoiced at the signing of the 1820 treaty, white Arkansans felt betrayed by the thought of letting the Choctaws settle on their land in the territory.



**Sketch of the Treaty of Doak's Stand (Choctaw), ca. 1820.  
Courtesy of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History.**

### **Choctaw Removal in the 1820s:**

At least 19,000 Choctaws passed through Arkansas during the 1820s. They suffered greatly from the weather as they crossed the Arkansas Territory on two available routes. Crossing the Mississippi River, they traveled up the Arkansas River to the mouth of the White River by steamboat before heading to Little Rock, where they rested at a makeshift rest area called Camp Pope (south of the city). After resting a few days, the Choctaws traveled down the Southwest Trail to Washington, headed to the Red River and their new home in the southern portion of the Indian Territory.

### **Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma**

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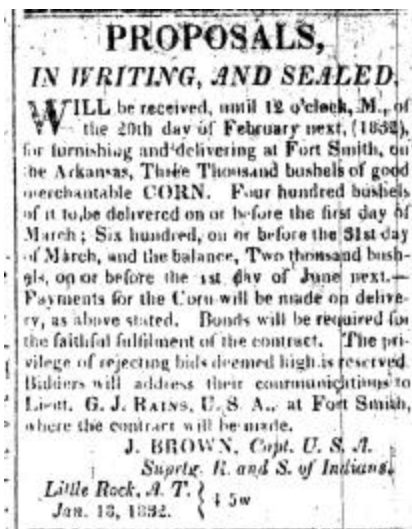
The second route, created to lessen congestion along the main Arkansas River/Southwest Trail Route, crossed the Mississippi River at Vicksburg. The Choctaws traveled up the Ouachita River and passed through Camden before heading west on the Fort Towson Road to Washington on the Southwest Trail. At Washington, these Choctaws were to head westward and join the others at their new home.

On both routes, supplies (pork, beef, flour and vegetables) were deposited at depots or stations set up to help feed the Choctaws. These supplies were provided by local farmers and paid for by the U.S. government. Numerous advertisements in the territory's largest newspaper, the *Arkansas Gazette*, urged citizens to supply foodstuffs for the emigrants. Many farmers agreed to sell their crops to the U.S. government at ridiculously high prices.

Although the majority of Choctaw emigrants signed up and traveled with U.S. military detachments, at least one thousand Choctaw crossed Arkansas on their own after receiving **commutations** (certificates signed by U.S. government officials allowing them to travel independently to their new homes).



Chief Pushmataha, signer of the Treaty of Doak's Stand, ca. 1820s. Courtesy of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History.



**Advertisement for corn to be supplied to the Choctaws at Fort Smith in the *Arkansas Gazette*, 13 February 1832.**

### **Arkansans React to the 1820s Emigration:**

White Arkansans felt betrayed by Mississippians after the 1820 Choctaw treaty. Although they were familiar with indigenous tribes living among them, including the Quapaw and Cherokee, many white Arkansans were living on land that was now given to the Choctaw. They would have to move and felt they had been left to defend themselves against a group of people who might take revenge for the wrongs committed in Mississippi against them. The *Arkansas Gazette* commented that the Choctaws were “poor deluded wretches” whose “resentment was already raised to the highest pitch.” They worried that the Choctaws would “glut [take] vengeance on weak and defenseless people, for injuries sustained in his native country.”

The U.S. Secretary of War, realizing that Arkansans were upset, tried to assure the population by saying that tribal members “exhibit [behavior] hardly paralleled in the civilized world. Intemperance [drinking] is almost unknown. They have organized, regular government – written and well-defined laws...cattle, horses and sheep in abundance, fine schools, and 150 scholars and various mechanic establishments...superstitious rites and customs abolished.”

Meanwhile, Mississippians argued that since Arkansas was not yet a state, it should naturally receive the tribe. Once Arkansas became a state, its citizens could have the Choctaws pushed further west once more.

## The Choctaws in 1830:

For 10 years, the Choctaws passed through Arkansas on their way to new homes in the Indian Territory while white settlers greedily coveted their land in Mississippi. After the passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the Choctaws were the first tribe to be removed under this new U.S. government policy.

In March of 1830, agents of the federal government met at Dancing Rabbit Creek in Mississippi to negotiate a full-scale removal treaty. They were to abandon all lands in Mississippi and leave for the Indian Territory. In exchange, the Choctaws would receive money, farm and household equipment, food for a full year and payment for improvements made to their land in Mississippi. The Choctaws were also promised \$20,000 per year for 20 years and education costs for their children would be covered by the federal government. At least \$2,000 would be paid to cover the costs of employing teachers and \$10,000 would be given to build a Choctaw council house, church and schools. In addition, gifts of blankets and other household goods would be given to resettled families. The U.S. government also agreed to protect them against foreign enemies and domestic turmoil in their new homes. The Choctaws initially rejected the treaty because the U.S. government made no promise to leave Choctaw lands in the Indian Territory alone once the tribe relocated. Furthermore, the Choctaws did not like the land offered to them. This rejection startled the U.S. government and they threatened the Choctaws with military retaliation if they did not sign the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek.

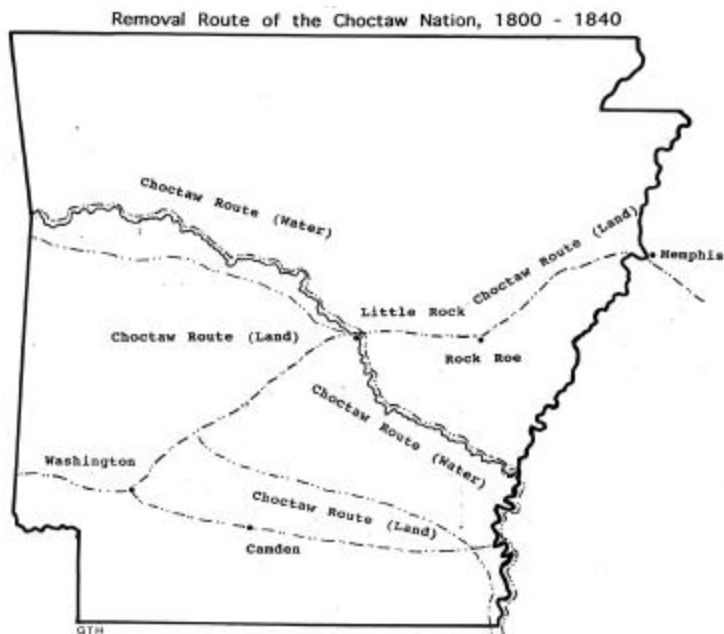
Facing military action, the tribe reconsidered and signed the treaty. The Choctaws were to leave Mississippi by the end of 1833. The first half of the tribe would move at the government expense in the fall of 1831 and through early 1832. The rest of the tribe would follow in 1833.

Upon hearing about the signing of the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, Chief David Folsom wrote a letter:

**“We are exceedingly tired. We have just heard of the Choctaw treaty. Our doom is sealed. There is no other course for us but to turn our faces and our new homes toward the setting sun.”**

The Choctaws who moved across Arkansas in the 1830s fared no better than the ones who had come before them in the 1820s. One army captain complained that “This unexpected cold weather produces much human suffering. Our poor emigrants, many of them are quite naked, and without much shelter, must suffer.”

The Choctaws traveled on the same 1820s routes while several new roads were cut out by the U.S. government to accommodate removal detachments. Those traveling on the Arkansas River became stranded when it was clogged with ice. Temperatures dropped below the freezing mark and many Choctaws were left stranded in camps across the Arkansas Territory. Those traveling through south Arkansas endured swampy conditions and waist-deep water.



Although official pictures of the tribe paint grim traveling conditions, pro-removal men in Arkansas tried to assure themselves that the Choctaws were happy and taken care of on their journey. William Woodruff, a Democrat and pro-removal editor of the newspaper, the *Arkansas Gazette*, visited Camp Pope, a rest station for emigrating Choctaws in 1832. He noted:

**“We have never met with Indians who appear to be more content and happy than they do. They are well-fed and quite as comfortably clad as Indians generally are, and we heard of but few cases of illness among them. They appear to be perfectly docile and harmless, exhibiting no disposition to encroach on the rights of our citizens; and it gives us great satisfaction to state that we have not heard of a single instance of disturbance or collision between them and the whites.”**

A more grim picture of Choctaw removal was painted in 1833, when it was reported by an anonymous contributor to the *Arkansas Gazette*:

**“Choctaws are dying to an alarming extent. There are three thousand Indians within the hearing of a gun from this spot, 100 have died within five weeks. The mortality among these people since the beginning of the fall amounts to one-fifth the whole number. The cause of so many deaths probably arises from the change of climate, the overflow of the Arkansas River, and having no physician among them except their own doctors...”**

By the 1830s, the U.S. government realized that more blankets, tents and items related to survival were needed for the Choctaws (and any other tribes being removed in the future). New roads were carved out of the Arkansas wilderness while bridges were built over flooding creeks and rivers.

The new routes took the Choctaws into Arkansas via Memphis, where they were divided up and placed on steamboats. Others were sent through Louisiana and up through south Arkansas to Camden and Washington. At least one group passed up the Arkansas River, landed at Arkansas Post and headed for Little Rock.

Despite the provisions and new transportation routes, many Choctaws suffered from exhaustion, hunger, sickness and destitution while in Arkansas. Many of the aged, infirm and children died from exposure. Blankets, shoes and clothing were scarce and the number of wagons provided for transportation were inadequate for the mass number of Choctaws. Money from the U.S. government to purchase supplies was growing short. In 1832, torrential rains poured through Arkansas and made crossing Arkansas swamps very dangerous. In addition, many of the Choctaws suffered from cholera that broke out in the detachments.

In 1833, the last official detachment of Choctaws traveled through Arkansas from Memphis under direction of the U.S. military. Stragglers continued to cross throughout the 1830s, but did not receive any of the benefits of the 1830 Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek since the Choctaw removal accounts had been officially closed by the U.S. government in 1833 and 1834.

The Choctaws settled in the eastern portion of Indian Territory at Durant. Tribal members are guided by a chief, which is elected by the people. Over eight thousand Choctaws still reside in Mississippi, living near the capital of Jackson and have a government similar to that of their ancestors in Oklahoma. The legacy of Choctaw removal can be seen in south Arkansas, where many descendents of emigrants decided to settle and live in the state. The Choctaw story is also unique because it was the first large-scale removal of an indigenous population within the U.S.



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