The Trail of Tears defined a generation of Choctaw ancestors profoundly. Last month, we featured the Wheelock Academy play from the 1930's that commemorated the centennial of the start of removals from the Homelands. This month, we are featuring a poem written by a Choctaw person during their journey from the Homelands to Indian Territory along the Trail of Tears and Death. This poem, written as a song, expresses the hardships of the trail and sentiments towards leaders of the day. While the author is anonymous, a letter that accompanied the poem stated that the author was in Peter Pitchlynn's moving party and that he likely attended the Choctaw Academy in Kentucky, a Choctaw Nation-funded boy's boarding school.

Throughout the poem, the writer references the route that they traveled. Starting their journey in early winter of 1831, a party from the Northeastern District of Choctaw country traveled by land to Memphis. The group continued from Memphis on the Brandywine steamship down the Mississippi River. Upon arrival at the Arkansas Post, they disembarked and waited for six weeks at the post until the river was navigable again. With thin clothes and no shoes, these Choctaws suffered through a blizzard with little shelter, blankets, clothing, or food. Once the water levels rose, the group departed again by boat and arrived at Little Rock. After camping there for one day, they sailed up the Arkansas River on the Reindeer steamship. Since the river water levels were too low, the party was forced to stop 90 miles below Fort Smith. The steamboat captain dumped the party on the shore. There they camped for one month enduring nearly record low temperatures for the area. Finally, water levels rose again and on February 20, 1832, the group arrived in Fort Smith.

A series of key players in the Choctaw removal are mentioned in the poem. Some of them are listed below:

Andrew Jackson – 7th President of the U.S.
John Eaton – Secretary of War
George Gaines – Choctaw Agent
Greenwood LeFlore – District Chief of Okla Falaia
David Folsom – District Chief of Ahepvt Okla
Wharton Rector – Removal Agent
John Fulton – Removal Agent
Captain Gordon – Captain of the Brandywine steamship
Thomas McGee – Removal Agent
Captain Brown – Dispersing Officer
Thomas Wall – Interpreter
Peter Pitchlyn – District Chief of Mushulatubbee district
Ellik McKee – probably a Choctaw in the party
Robert Jones – Choctaw politician, entrepreneur
Okdanowa – Captain & Acting Chief for Peter Pitchlyn
Henry Clay – Presidential Candidate against Jackson 1832

Note: The following poem is not the work of the 'Iti Fabvssa' writers. In this transcription of a document archived at the Gilcrease Museum, we have included notes and scratched out portions of this unfinished poem. Jaw bones have been used as musical instruments and this may have been based on a song style of the time period. For more contextual information about the genre, see Frank Kelderman, "Walking the New Jaw Bone: Song, Slavery, and the Literature of Choctaw Removal," 2019.

1. Jackson send the Secretary War
   To the Indians of the law
   Walk o jaw bone walk I say
   Walk o jaw bone walk away.

2. Eaton tells us go away
   Here no longer you can stay
   Walk o jaw bone walk I say
   Walk o jaw bone walk away.

3. On my way to the Arkansas

G_d d_n the white man's laws
   0 come and go along with me
   0 come and go along with me

4. Farewell now to our happy plains
   And to you too Brother Gaines
   0 come and let us gang along.
   0 come and let us gang along.

5. Our only friend in time of need
   He's the man we love indeed
O blessings on his frosty pow
O blessings on his frosty pow

6. At Memphis town we took a draw
And over more dam’d old Uncle Sam
The die is cast and we are undone
The die is cast and we are undone

7. Be our fate good or bad
We have cause to be sad
The Indian question now is o’er,
Down the River we did foam
White man, Be happy as you may

8. But When we have gone to the west
You will think it for us the best
You will say tis for the best
We shall never think it so.
We shall never think it so.

9. John H Eaton and Leflore
Can never rise any more
Never can rise any more.
They Withered laurels for their brows
Withered laurels for their brows.

10. John H. Eaton is a pup
With old nick he’ll sure to sup
Withered laurels for his brow
Withered laurels for his brow.
From the papers we have been

11. We hate the fool with all our might
He’d had better keep our sight.
It is Eaton we do meane
It is Eaton we do meane.

12. At Dancing Rabbit he did not speak smart.
But 0 his forked tongue and shallow hart
Was nough to make old jaw bone talk quake
Was nough to make old jaw bone talk quake

13. May Seatan’s pin lash him again
And keep him in eternal pain
To this we sing with louder noise
To this we sing with louder noise

14. Farewell now Secretary Johny
May his path through life be thorny
O Johny the Secretary Johny
O Johny the Secretary Johny.

15. Greenwood Leflore is Chief no more
The tyrant’s carrier is now o’er
The simplest chief of all the Clans
The simplest chief of all the Clans

16. He was the man that took a bribe
From unde Sam’s clever little scribe
Ah walk jaw bone walk away
Ah walk jaw bone walk I say

17. He turned against the orphan boy
For one little negro boy
Heaven blast him I do say
Heaven blast him I do say

18. Should ever again he cross our path
We will give him the Devil’s wrath
For he is the man that took a bribe
For he is the man that took a bribe
Of all the men I ever saw

Folsom has the biggest jaw.
Walk o jaw bone walk away.
Walk o jaw bone walk I say.

19. Of all the Agents of the West
Rector and Foulton are the best,
0 come and let us gang along
0 come and let us gang along.
Of all the Agents of the East
On fly boats we [illegible] sail’d
On steam boats they crowded us
Our jaw bone song to them we’ll sing

20. The good old steamer Brandywine
We have now left behind.
Farewell to Captain Gordon & his crew
Farewell to Captain Gordon & his crew

21. The dam’d’st time we ever saw
Was at the Post of Arkansaw.
The meanest place in all the world
The meanest place in all the world.

22. Seventy sleeps there we laid
While it snow’d and upon us hail’d
Oh the hard times we did see
Oh the hard times we did see.

23. It snow’d it hail’d I do you tell
I thought it twould pelt us all to hell
0 the hard times we did see
0 the hard times we did see.

24. Look to the west our chief did say.
Every Dog will have his day
May ours be not far away.
May ours be not far away.

25. The salted pork & damn poor beef
I nough to make the Devil a thief
This is hard times I do say
This is hard times I do say

26. Farewell now to old McGee
Him I hope to never see.
Walk o jaw bone walk I say
Walk o jawbone walk away.

27. I think at home he’d better say
And safe himself of a fray.
Walk o jaw bone walk I saw
Walk o jawbone walk away.

28. The Little Rock we did pass
The town is small but growing fast.

29. Captain Brown there resides
Over the Agents he presides.
He is a man that’s true to us
He is a man that’s true to us.
We wish him well with all our heart

30. Our interpreter is Major Wall,
He is the man that suits us all.
The joviallest fellow of all the crew
The joviallest fellow of all the crew
Chief Pitchlynn is our friend
Tis in him we do depend
The truest fellow in all the world
The truest fellow in all the world
Ellik McKee is our friend
In him sir we do depend.
The tallest Indian of all our race
Robert Jones is of our crew
He is a man that is true blue
Oldanowa is the speaker
He is indeed a roaring ripper
Huzza now for the Choctaw Nation

Huzza now for the Choctaw Nation
Our jaw bone song is at an end
We shall wind with a shoot
The crookedest stream I ever saw
Tis the River Arkansaw.
Five hundred miles up it we have sailed
Of all the Agents of the East
Old McGee I like the least.
God bless Jackson we do pray
He's a better man than Henry Clay

Source:
'Poem regarding removal of Choctaw,' Peter Pitchlynn Collection, 4026.8176
Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma

These eloquent words by a Choctaw person experiencing the hardships of removal 189 years ago reveal how different a time and world it was in 1831. This poem provides us a window into the mindset and sophisticated political awareness of Choctaw people during removal from the homeland against their will. If you have an old Choctaw poem, story, or song to share, please contact the Historic Preservation Department at http://choctawnationculture.com/or by phone at 1-800-522-6170.