

# A Trail of Tears song: The New Jaw Bone

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 Pitchlynn – District Chief of Mushulatubbee district  
Ellik McKee – probably a Choctaw in the party  
Robert Jones – Choctaw politician, entrepreneur  
Oklanowa – Captain & Acting Chief for Peter Pitchlynn  
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  
O come and go along with me  
O come and go along with me  
4. Farewell now to our happy plains  
And to you too Brother Gaines  
O come and let us gang along.  
O come and let us gang along.  
5. Our only friend in time of 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  
 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 O 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 uncle 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 Devils 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,  
~~O come and let us gang along~~  
~~O come and let us gang along.~~  
~~Of all the Agents of the East~~  
~~On fire 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  
 O the hard times we did see  
 O 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 jovialest fellow of all the crew  
 The jovialest 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  
The tallest Indian of our race.  
Robert Jones is of our Crew  
He is a man that is true blue  
~~In smart a man as we e'r knew~~  
~~To him we sing our jaw bone song~~  
~~To him we sing our jaw bone song~~  
Oklanowa 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.