

Tribal Services support every stage of Choctaw life

Since the beginning of this year, Iti Fabvssa has run the series Enduring Legacies, where we reflect on the history of each division of our executive branch of government. This includes the divisions of Commerce, Integrated Services, Legal & Compliance, Strategic Development, and Tribal Services. This article is the last in our series and focuses on Choctaw Nation's Division of Tribal Services.

After Choctaw people arrived in Indian Territory from the Trail of Tears, they immediately began to rebuild our government. Living in the aftermath of displacement from our ancestral homelands, Choctaw leaders created sets of laws aimed at protecting Choctaws' land base in Indian Territory. They were particularly concerned about trespassers, especially those who intruded into Choctaw ancestral homelands for hundreds of years, abused community relationships, and caused violent unrest that eventually led to the removal of the Five Tribes. This history later informed Choctaw General Council decision-making, particularly its laws aimed at preventing white settlers from gaining land in Indian Territory.

In October 1836, the Choctaw General Council (what we today call Tribal Council) passed two laws regarding outsiders. One law required white men who wanted to work in Choctaw Nation's territorial boundaries to have a permit. The other required non-Choctaw Indians to get permission from General Council to settle in Choctaw Territory. By regulating who could live and work on Choctaw lands, Choctaw Nation asserted its sovereignty to protect its lands, people, and way of life. At first glance, this might seem like an exclusionary tactic that countered Choctaw values of generosity. But if we take a closer look and consider other laws passed by General Council as a response to historical patterns of intrusion on Choctaw territories, we can see how Choctaw leadership's regulation of outsiders was a way to protect our people and culture.

Connected to Choctaws' concern for the maintaining control of their lands and its borders was a deep concern for Choctaws' ability to live as our ancestors did. Intrusion by white settlers in Choctaw territory often meant the introduction of foreign ideas that attacked important parts of Choctaw lifeways. American settlers looked down on Choctaw ways of life such as the importance of women in society, playing stickball, sharing traditional knowledge, and land management practices. Across North America, Americans restricted Indigenous ways of life and even created oppressive laws like outlawing Native Americans' religions and dances. Despite the oppression of Choctaw culture, these traditions continue to be important to our lives in the present. Sue Folsom, Executive Director of Cultural Services, reminds us, "Without our culture, we won't have a Choctaw Nation, we won't have this identity of showing who the Choctaw people are." Recognizing the significance of Choctaw culture, we understand why it is critical for us to have control over our lands after removal. Choctaws wanted to live in peace with our god given sovereignty and carry on living as a whole community of Choctaw people during a time when others tried to strip that away.

Our concern for community also informed some of General Councils' other laws regarding outsiders. Throughout the 1800s, General Council also passed laws that granted Choctaw citizenship to individuals with no Choctaw blood. Prior to Choctaw removal to Indian Territory, Caddo people called the region that is now Choctaw treaty territory their homelands. Recognizing this, General Council created permits that allowed Caddo families to continue living in Choctaw Nation's boundaries. General Council also passed laws that allowed Creek, Cherokee, Shawnee, and Quapaw families to live in Choctaw territory on a case-by-case basis. Individuals who were granted citizenship and lived in the territory were expected to follow Choctaw laws and abide by Choctaw sovereignty. In 1853, the General Council naturalized fourteen non-Choctaws, giving them all the rights that come with Choctaw citizenship. Naturalization



Choctaw women at a camp meeting where Choctaw communities came together. Photo circa 1907 and courtesy of the E.A. Coleman Photo Collection, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma.

can be understood as part of a long tradition of adopting and integrating outsiders into Choctaw society. Given this variety of ways that Choctaws brought in and accepted outsiders, this helps us understand the strict regulation of Choctaw territory differently.

Protecting Choctaw land was of the utmost importance since that is the place where we lived together as a nation. This is in part why Choctaw Nation owned the land collectively, giving parcels of land to families as they needed. Up until the late-1800s, private property was not a common practice among Choctaws – particularly because it countered Choctaw understandings of our relationship to the land which emphasized collective care for our lands by the whole community. In the face of American settler encroachment on Choctaw lands, Choctaws integrated some aspects of the private property system into Choctaw governance in order to prevent American settlers from stealing Choctaws' lands further. By adapting a legal system like the Americans, Choctaws tried to force Americans to respect our sovereignty over our lands. Unfortunately, that was not

the outcome.

In 1898, the Curtis Act ended the Choctaws' practice of holding land title communally. Choctaws were then forced to take allotments, which made individual Choctaws into landowners. Unlike the reservation system that many other American Indian nations had to deal with, Choctaws owned their individual tracts of land with the Bureau of Indian Affairs also monitoring and managing on behalf of some Choctaws. This eventually created a complicated system of land ownership that still affects the lives of Choctaws across the ten and a half counties today. Over decades, conditions created by allotment policies caused Choctaw families to lose their homes and land. To counter these negative effects, Choctaw leadership demanded the federal government to honor treaties by paying treaty annuities and per capita payments, so Choctaw people could live together with all that they needed. Overall, allotment divided our communities and took away some of our ability to care for one another.

Today, Choctaw Nation continues to provide for Choctaw people, and we see this prominently through the work of the Division of Tribal Services. Under the umbrella of this division are Health Services and Member Services, which includes: Chahta Foundation, Chaplain, Cultural Services, Education, Housing, Outreach Services, and Special Services. Reflecting on Choctaw Nation's status as a sovereign nation, Executive Officer of Member Services Stacy Shepherd reminds us "sovereignty allows us an opportunity to govern ourselves." As a result, Choctaw government provides a wide range of programs and services aimed at empowering its citizens. These programs include (but are not limited to): healthcare, housing assistance, Olin William's chaplain services, support for veterans, scholarships, and opportunities to learn about our Choctaw culture. From the time a Choctaw child is born to the time they return to our ancestors, Choctaw Nation offers services that support every stage of a Choctaw person's life. Furthermore, in the spirit of Choctaw generosity and leadership's philosophy that uplifting Choctaw people also means uplifting others along with them, Tribal Services also has programs with opportunities for non-Choctaws. For instance, Choctaw Nation allows any child living in the 10.5 counties to attend Choctaw Nation's summer school program and join the Youth Advisory Board (YAB), a high school leadership program. While Choctaw citizens are the focus of member services, Choctaw Nation carries on the Chahta spirit and its values of inclusion and generosity towards all people with whom we share our lands.

This concludes our Enduring Legacy series. For more information, please contact Megan Baker at 580-924-8280 ext. 2377 or meganb@choctawnation.com. To read previous Enduring Legacy articles or read past issues of Iti Fabvssa, visit <http://www.choctawnation.com/history-culture/history/iti-fabvssa>.