

The Battle of Massard Prairie

For this month's edition of Iti Fabvssa, we are going to go back in time to an important battle that involved a number of Choctaw soldiers during the later stages of the American Civil War. First, a bit of background.

At the beginning of the American Civil War, federal military units had withdrawn from their outposts in Choctaw Nation. By doing so, the federal government broke a treaty agreement to protect the Choctaw people, and left the Choctaw Nation essentially surrounded by Confederate forces. The only choices left to tribal leadership were to be destroyed, to leave the area as war refugees, or to join the Confederacy. Many of the individuals who interacted with the Choctaw on behalf of the Confederacy were the same Southern men with whom the Choctaw had dealt as representatives of the United States government during the years before the war. With no more promising alternative, the Choctaw Nation signed a treaty with the Confederacy on July 12, 1861. Among its 64 articles were pledges that Confederate forces would protect the Choctaw Nation at all cost from a Union invasion if one were to occur, that Choctaw forces would not be conscripted to fight outside of Indian Territory, and that a Choctaw/Chickasaw delegate would be a part of the House of Representatives of the Confederate States of America. Ultimately, very few of these promises were kept.

During the Civil War, Choctaw men were repeatedly asked to leave Choctaw Nation to fight federal forces in Missouri, Arkansas, and other areas of what is now Oklahoma. With the men's absence, it was difficult for people back home to get full crops planted and harvested. As the war progressed, refugees from tribes farther to the north, including the Cherokee and Muscogee moved into Choctaw country, putting a heavier strain on already short food supplies. To make matters worse, in early 1864, a Union army under Maj. Gen Blunt invaded the western Choctaw Nation, pushing all the way to the Red River. As Choctaw homes and fields were destroyed in the army's path, some non-Choctaw Confederate forces sat in safety on the south side of the river. Thereafter, many Choctaw citizens were destitute, hungry, and suffering continuing depredations from bandit gangs.

This brings us to the Battle of Massard Prairie, an event that demonstrates something special about the Choctaw character. By this point in the war, Choctaws had been fighting for three years; promises made by the Confederacy to the Choctaw people had been broken; houses and crops had been destroyed, and Choctaw citizens were suffering considerably. Because these Choctaw soldiers received no pay and very little provisions from the Confederacy, they were probably hungry and frustrated and wanting to attend to their families at home. It might seem that they had no real reason to leave Choctaw Nation to risk their lives fighting for the Confederacy once again. Yet, they had something powerful within them; the spirit and determination of a Choctaw warrior.

On the 26th of July, 1864, Confederate Col. Douglas Cooper got word that Union troops were camped out in vulnerable positions around Fort Smith, Arkansas. He sent a force of about 600 men, comprised of Choctaw soldiers, Chickasaw soldiers, and soldiers from Texas, to attack one of these camps. Plans changed as the situation developed, but ultimately, this force, commanded by Brigadier General R. M Gano, attacked the camp of the 6th Kansas Cavalry (200 men) at dawn a few miles southwest of Fort Smith. The attack happened so swiftly, that the cavalry was unable to round up its horses, which had been grazing in the pasture. The Union troops were forced to fight on foot.

After putting up initial resistance, the 6th Kansas Cavalry was routed and driven 2 and 1/2 miles across the prairie. More than 100 Union men were captured, along with 200 rifles and 400 pistols. The Confederate force lost seven men. After the quick attack, Gano's men headed back to Oklahoma virtually unscathed. They hoped to ambush any pursuers along the way.

Looking back, the Battle of Massard Prairie is significant in Choctaw history on multiple levels. In terms of the American Civil War, the top-of-the-line weapons that were captured from the 6th Kansas Cavalry helped the poorly supplied Choctaw units keep up armed resistance until the bitter end. In fact, it was within the Choctaw Nation that the last Confederate general surrendered, Stand Watie (a Cherokee) at Doaksville, June 23, 1865.

In terms of personnel, several prominent Choctaw Nation leaders fought at Massard Prairie. Col. Simpson Folsom was noted for his bravery in pressing the attack on the Union camp. Col. Jack McCurtain "Tvshkahoma," was waiting with a Choctaw force to ambush any Union forces that may have pursued Folsom and the others into Indian Territory. McCurtain would later become the Chief of the Choctaw Nation, and would lead the nation through Reconstruction; the Choctaw Council House and the town of Tuskahoma, are both named after him. William Cass, "Tiakhomma," a signatory to the 1858 Choctaw constitution, served as the chaplain for the Choctaw troops at the Battle of Massard Prairie. He lost his life in this engagement, while leading an attack and is likely buried on the battlefield. "Red Pine," the English translation of "Tiakhomma," is a modern street in Fort Smith named after this man.

As for its legacy, the Battle of Massard Prairie has been and continues to be seen as a testament to the resilience of Choctaw soldiers who faced incredible hardship during the American Civil War. To the best of the author's knowledge, the Battle of Massard Prairie represents the last major victory attained by Choctaw units fighting with the Confederacy, and in broader terms, it also represents the last time in Choctaw history that a victory was attained by full Choctaw military units. Today, despite encroaching development, a portion of the battlefield is preserved in the Massard Prairie Battlefield Park, maintained by the town of Fort Smith. Each year, a reenactment is held, on-site, with Choctaw tribal members as regular participants.