

## The History of the Great Seal of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma

During the course of a given month, the Historic Preservation Department is contacted numerous times by tribal members looking for answers to questions about Choctaw history and culture. Over the years, some of the most commonly recurring questions have involved the tribal seal. For this month's edition of Iti Fabvssa, we have put together what we know about the history of the tribal seal. It is far from being the full story.

To the best of our knowledge, the Choctaw tribal seal was first formalized as an idea in the 1857 tribal constitution, signed at Skullyville. On Oct. 24, 1860, the seal came up again through a special act at the regular annual session of the Choctaw General Council meeting held at Doaksville. Section 4 of the act directed that:

The Principal Chief shall procure, at an early day, at the cost of the Nation, a great seal of the Nation, with the words "The Great Seal of the Choctaw Nation" around the edge, and a design of an unstrung bow, with three arrows and a pipe-hatchet blended together, engraven in the centre, which shall be the proper seal of this Nation until altered by the General Council, with the concurrence of both houses thereof.

All of these elements have symbolic meanings. The unstrung bow represents both the love of peace that the Choctaw people have had through time, and the willingness to go to war at a moment's notice if attacked. The three arrows stand for Chiefs Pushmataha, Mushulatubbe, and Apukshunabbe. These men were the leaders of the three Choctaw Districts in 1820, when the Treaty of Doak's Stand was signed. It was through this treaty that the United States ceded the lands in present-day southeastern Oklahoma that would become the Choctaw Nation. The pipe-hatchet represents the desire of the Choctaw people to establish beneficial alliances with neighbors, but also perhaps prowess.

Although the Chief George Hudson approved the above act in 1860, the physical creation of the seal may have been delayed by the American Civil War, at least, there is no documentation of one being created before or during the war that we are aware of. We do know that in a letter written at Boggy Depot on March 1, 1867, Chief Allen Wright asked Peter Pitchlynn, then in Washington D.C., to have the tribal seal created. He was probably talking about a seal press, used to emboss an impression of the tribal seal onto official correspondence of the Choctaw Nation. Chief Wright recommended that Pitchlynn visit an establishment located on Pennsylvania Avenue, apparently the same one that Chickasaw Nation had contracted to create their seal or seal press a short time earlier. The completed seal was to be brought back to Choctaw Nation by Israel Folsom.

The whereabouts of Chief Wright's seal are unknown to the Historic Preservation Department. Sometime after statehood, the Bureau of Indian Affairs took custody of the official seal presses

that were then in use by the Five Tribes. One seal press, dated between 1895 and 1905, is curated at the Capitol Museum in Tvshka Homma.

Although the basic structure of the seal has stayed the same, the artistic representation of its elements has changed through time. Early versions of the seal depict a Choctaw longbow shown on a small scale (Figure 1). Sometime before 1940, the seal was redrawn replacing the Choctaw bow with an English-style longbow, with antler tips (Figure 2). The reason for changing the bow is unknown, but there are several possibilities. One is that English target archery was popular in the early 1900s, and perhaps that was the type of bow that the artist was familiar with. A second possibility involves the fact that during the early 1900s, tribal chiefs were appointed by the United States president under a policy that was ultimately intended to terminate the tribe. During those years, there was an incorrect belief that the English bow was superior to the Native American bow. It may be that the English bow was used on the seal as a symbol of the artist's belief that the tribe was converting to Euro-American ways of doing things.

There have been other changes to the seal. As the tribe regained self-determination in the 1970s and 1980s, a version of the seal was used that looked like it had a strung bow. In December 1983, a new version was presented with an unstrung bow (Figure 3). Through the 1980s and 1990s, several different depictions of the unstrung bow were used (Figure 4). In 1997, with input from tribal council member Charlie Jones, the bow on the tribal seal was redrawn as being partially braced (Figure 5). A partially braced bow has one end of the string attached, the loop at the other end of the string is slid around the bow limb. With one simple motion, that loop in the string can be slid over the nock, and the bow is strung ready to fire arrows. This change was made to more realistically represent a Choctaw bow when not in use. This is the version of the official seal that is currently in use today.

That is what we know. For something as recent, local, and directly tied to the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, it is surprising that we don't know more than we currently do about the tribal seal. If you know about a piece of the story that is not told here, please contact us at (800) 522-6170 ext. 2216.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

The seals of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma throughout history.