

An Act of Empathy

We recently answered a letter from a tribal member who was interested in exactly how a Choctaw donation made it across the Atlantic Ocean and into the hands of those suffering during the Irish Famine. This was such a fascinating story that we thought other readers might like to know as well. This month's Iiti Fabvssa reflects on the compassionate spirit of our ancestors and a single act of empathy.

To begin, the Irish Famine was not just one year of hardship, but rather a series of crop failures, or potato blight, responsible for the deaths of over one million people and the resulting emigration of over two million people beginning in 1845 and lasting to 1855 (Donnelly 2002, Kinealy 2012). Potato blight is caused by *Phytophthora Infestans*, a fungus that is extremely hard to treat in potato and tomato crops once a field has been infected because spores lie dormant in rotted plants and leaves, seeds, plant tubers in the ground, and the soil, even between seasons of planting (Hooker 1986, Uchida 2006). To make matters worse, once the spores become airborne, the infection quickly spreads to adjacent fields and can devastate farming communities for miles.

Unfortunately, the loss from potato blight left an enormous food shortage in Ireland (approximately 60%), especially in remote areas, that was nearly impossible to remedy even if the British Empire had restricted the export of other crops from Ireland (Donnelly 2002). The British Empire responded to the famine, not with additional food supplements but with the implementation of work relief programs and management strategies; these quickly proved problematic. From the start they were ineffective solutions because the Irish people already suffering from the effects of malnutrition and exhaustion, had no food to purchase even with the added wages. Added pressure to complete the projects just aggravated an already dire situation. International relief was generous, but in the end, the flood of imported grain and international charitable efforts were simply not enough to stop the spread of disease and starvation that swept the country.

At this time, in Indian Territory, Choctaw people were continuing to rebuild their lives after the forced removal from our homeland sixteen years earlier. Remembering our hardships along the Trail of Tears, Choctaw families identified with the anguish of the spread of disease and the starvation of the Irish people; it was a familiar heartache. In 1847, after the first potato blight, Choctaw people collected money and donated it to families in Ireland through a philanthropist by the name of Myndert van Schaick (Kinealy 2015, Donnelly 2002). Schaick led the General Irish Relief Committee located in New York City who gave the money to the Society of Friends in Dublin, Ireland, which had been established in 1846 after the first potato blight. The Society of Friends worked with the Quakers to provide direct support to Irish families in the form of cash, fuel, seeds, blankets, and soup kitchens (Kinealy 2015). Several historical accounts attest to funds donated by Choctaw People, some at various locations, others at only one location, some

even credit a much larger donation, but it is clear that at least \$170 did make it to Ireland in this manner.

What is particularly interesting about this story is the very nature of how the Quakers helped the Irish people. Other religious organizations providing relief wanted something in return for their donation to Irish families. Whether it was a day's labor, school attendance by Irish children, a verbal conversion, a baptism, or other request, aid was conditional. The Quakers, however, provided their services to Irish families unconditionally. This unconditional charity likely appealed to Choctaw people having suffered so greatly the years leading to removal, during the Trail of Tears, and after. This single act of compassion to seeming strangers some 4300 miles across the Atlantic Ocean, united two nations, forging a bond to last for generations. Today, Choctaw people can visit the beautiful monument commemorating this act of empathy created by artist Alex Pentek entitled: "Kindred Spirits" in Bailic Park in Middleton, Ireland (Kemp 2015).

References:

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- Hooker, W. J.; 1986. Editor. Compendium of Potato Diseases. American Phytopathological Society Press. St. Paul, Minnesota.
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- Uchida, Janice Y.; 2002 Knowledge Master. The University of Hawaii, College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, Hawaii Department of Agriculture.



The act of compassion by the Choctaw people was commemorated in a painting by America Meridith.



***Kindred Spirits*, a tribute to the Choctaw people, was completed last year and sits in Bailic Park in County Cork, Ireland.**