

ITI FABVSSA

A New Chahta Homeland: A History by the Decade, 1870-1880

Iti Fabvssa is currently running a series that covers the span of Oklahoma Choctaw history. By examining each decade since the Choctaw government arrived in our new homelands using Choctaw-created documents, we will get a better understanding of Choctaw ancestors' experiences and how they made decisions that have led us into the present. This month, we will be covering 1870-1880, an era dominated by Choctaw Nation's engagements with railroad companies, its entry into the coal mining industry, and constant attempts by U.S. Congress to undermine Choctaw sovereignty over our own lands.

For years, railroad companies wanted to build a route between Kansas and Mexico through Indian Territory. But these companies were unable to do so because the Five Tribes owned their lands in fee simple. By holding outright title – unusual for an Indigenous nation at the time – it made it more difficult for Congress to pass legislation that would force them to give up their lands. Given this, Congress took advantage of the post-Civil War reconstruction treaties of 1866 to leverage concessions like allowing one north-south and one east-west railroad to be built through Indian Territory. As these treaties were being ratified, companies began building railroads.

Since there could only be one railroad in each direction, railroad companies raced each other to lay down track. The first company to build a railroad from one of its existing lines to the border of Indian Territory would be granted the official right of way through Indian Territory. Three railroads competed, but it ultimately came down to two: the Missouri River, Fort Scott and Gulf Railroad (MRFS&G) and the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railway (MK&T, also nicknamed the Katy). Due to trickery on behalf of an individual working for the MK&T, the MRFS&G laid track up to the border of the Quapaw reserve, a place where they could not cross. As a result, when the MK&T reached the Cherokee border in June 1870, Congress granted it the right to build through Indian Territory. From there, the MK&T passed through the Cherokee and Muscogee (Creek) Nations before arriving in the Choctaw Nation in 1871.

Following the 1866 treaty, the Choctaw Nation considered developing its own railroad to prevent outside companies and U.S. settlers seeking profits related to the railroad industry from invading our territory. The closest that the Choctaw Nation came to creating its own railroad was with the Choctaw and Chickasaw Thirty-Fifth Parallel Railroad Company. It published its charter in 1870 and distributed it among Choctaws and Chickasaws in both English and Choctaw languages. According to this charter, it would have only granted usage of the space, not land ownership. This was an important distinction, for the Choctaw Nation would have been able to maintain control over the land. Under U.S. laws, U.S. railroad companies sought to own the land that the railroads were on as well as townsites where the railroad would stop. Before any track for the Thirty-Fifth Parallel Railroad could be laid, Chickasaw opposition stopped a Choctaw-owned railroad from moving forward.

As the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas Railroad was built through Choctaw Nation, it gave rise to many of the towns that still exist today. The MK&T stopped in the towns of Reams, McAlester, Savanna, Kiowa, Stringtown, Atoka, Caney, Caddo, Armstrong, Durant, Calera and Colbert. In

1872, MK&T line construction was ended upon reaching Denison, Texas. Once completed, the MK&T made Indian Territory far more accessible to outside markets – which proved to be especially useful for the increasing industrialization of coal mining in the Choctaw Nation. Coal quickly became Indian Territory’s most important export and spurred massive changes in Choctaw Nation.

In August 1872, James Jackson McAlester applied for a permit to marry Rebecca Burney, a Chickasaw woman who was a citizen of the Choctaw Nation. McAlester first arrived in Choctaw Territory in 1869, when he received a permit to work at a trading firm within the boundaries of the Choctaw Nation. According to Choctaw law, white people could only live and work in the Choctaw Nation if they held a work permit for specific jobs, like doctor or trader, or intermarried citizens. Before coming to the Choctaw Nation, an engineer who helped survey Choctaw lands in the 1820s drew McAlester a map with the location of coal outcrops. McAlester followed that map with the hope of striking big. Because he was not a Choctaw citizen, he was unable to own land – until he married Rebecca Burney. Through marriage, McAlester was granted the rights of Choctaw citizenship. He then worked with other white intermarried citizens to lease lands from Choctaws, so they could then lease the lands to coal companies like the Osage Coal and Mining Company – which he had a controlling interest in. The various permits that McAlester had to get before he became a citizen show how the Choctaw Nation carefully regulated its lands and how permits were important tools for curbing the tide of white intrusion into Choctaw lands and affairs.

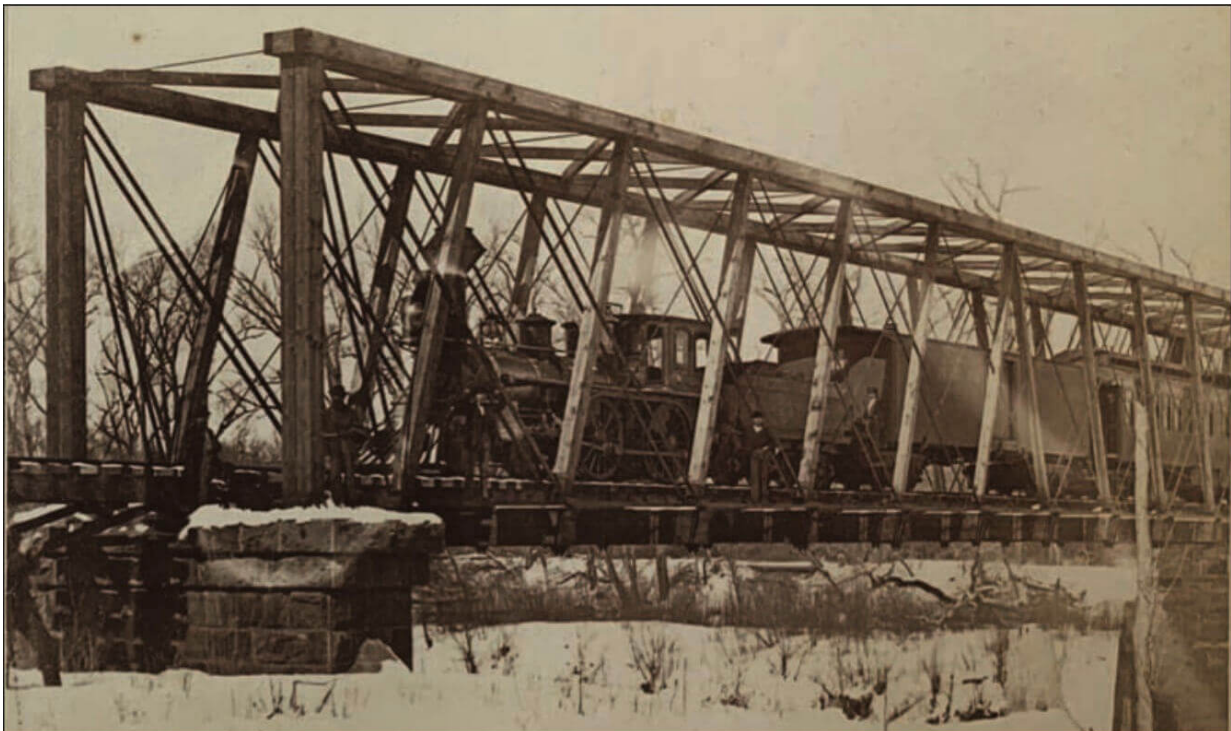
While wary of possible interference by outsiders, some leaders in Choctaw government saw coal mining as an opportunity for raising money to operate the government and improve life for Choctaw people. In 1875, Chief Coleman Cole called on the General Council to use natural resources to fund schools. As the coal industry grew, the General Council established the office of the Mining Trustee to keep track of all mining-related business, tracking information like how much coal was produced and shipped outside of Indian Territory. The Mining Trustee kept track of all the companies operating in Choctaw Nation and made sure they paid the required fees and taxes to mine. While the mining industry became an important source of revenue for the Choctaw Nation, the Tribe did not have complete control over the industry because of constant interference by U.S. citizens and Congress. In the early years of coal mining, white men like McAlester exploited loopholes in Choctaw law to purchase land that they would then lease to coal companies to enrich themselves at the expense of the entire Choctaw community. This had lasting consequences.

The introduction of railroads and the emergence of the coal mining industry in the Choctaw Nation led to a massive influx of non-Choctaw people who worked in the railroad and coal industries. Indian Territory quickly became known in coal mining communities as having new opportunities for work – especially for individuals who got blacklisted by East Coast mines for trying to improve mining working conditions. Many of these workers were recent immigrants from Italy, Poland and Ireland. To learn more about these mining communities in the Choctaw Nation, see Iti Fabvssa’s November 2020 article, “Putting the Coal in Coalgate, exhibit teaches about past.” This migration of workers put massive pressure on Choctaw government that led to greater U.S. intervention in Choctaw affairs.

Following the Treaty of 1866, Choctaw Nation delegates working out of Washington, D.C. were constantly fighting against proposed legislation that would make Indian Territory into a U.S.

territory. As an official U.S. territory, the U.S. would have more power over the Indigenous nations and pave the way towards statehood. To do so, the U.S. would have broken numerous treaty promises. In an 1870 response to a bill to territorialize Indian Territory before Congress, Peter Pitchlynn submitted a 21-page formal protest against the bill. He argued, “[Choctaw Nation] can plainly foresee that when such a Territorial government has once been established, their country will be filled with white men, their people defrauded out of and robbed of their lands, as they were in Mississippi, with the connivance of the officers of the Government; that the jurisdiction and powers of their local legislatures and judiciaries will be encroached on, and these themselves be soon swept away; and that at no distant day the Choctaw people will have disappeared, and the tongue of their ancestors have become a dead language.” This was precisely what the Choctaw Nation did not want and was made clear in the 1830 removal treaty that stated, “that no part of the land granted them shall forever be embraced in any capital Territory or State.” Nevertheless, the U.S. Congress still worked to claim and take over the Five Tribes and their lands.

Next month, we will cover the period of 1880-1890 when Choctaw Nation faced increasing challenges in governing its lands due to the massive migration of white settlers as well as attempts by the U.S. government to allot Choctaw lands and break up our government. Additional reading resources on this period are available on the Choctaw Nation Cultural Service webpage (<https://choctawnationculture.com/choctaw-culture/additional-resources.aspx>). Follow this Iti Fabvssa series in print and online at <https://www.choctawnation.com/history-culture/history/iti-fabvssa>. If you have questions or would like more information on the sources, please contact Megan Baker at meganb@choctawnation.com.



The completed Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railway, traveling through Indian Territory. Courtesy of: Box 72, Robert S. Stevens Collection, Stevens family papers, #1210, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.