

# A Brief History of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians

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Mississippi Band of Choctaw

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Exactly when the Choctaw moved into what would become eastern central and south Mississippi is not known yet. It was probably some time in the late 1500s or early 1600s, after Spanish introduced plagues of the mid-1500s wiped out an estimated 70% - 90% of the population in the Southeast. The origins of the Choctaw are not very clear at this time, but ongoing archaeological research will hopefully shed light on their origins in the near future. The Choctaw were probably a confederacy of several related remnant groups which had survived the plagues who came together in the then unoccupied area of east-central and south Mississippi. The oral history of the Choctaw give us two different versions of their origins. In one story they migrated from the west, lead by two great leaders and brothers, Chata and Chicasa, who would eventually lend their names to the peoples of the Choctaw and the Chickasaw. In another story the Choctaw were created at the sacred mound site Nanih Waiya, an earthen mound near Noxapater, Mississippi, where they emerged through a cave from some underworld place.

The Choctaw are first mentioned by name in 1675 by a Spanish priest in Florida, who, in an attempt to prevent settlement away from the established missions in Florida, warned settlers against going too far to the west because of the fearsome "Chata". This name is still what the Choctaw call themselves today. "Chata" does not have any meaning in the Choctaw language, but does mean "flat" in mainstream Spanish and apparently "flat head" in some of the South American dialects. "Flatheads" is one of the very early English names for the Choctaw, deriving from the Choctaw practice of flattening the heads of infants, a practice common throughout history in North America. It is therefore probable that the name "Chata" and thus "Choctaw" comes not from the Choctaw themselves, but instead from the Spanish.

The first sustained contact with Europeans came with the French establishment of colonial Louisiana by Iberville in 1699. The Choctaw became fast French allies for the next 65 years, supporting the fledgling colony with both food and as allies in wars against the French's traditional enemies the English and those Indians who supported the English. This strong alliance was the result of the French giving them guns for the first time. Those guns gave the Choctaw the ability to protect themselves from English armed Indian groups, primarily the Chickasaw and Creeks, which had been raiding the Choctaw for slaves since the early 1680s.

In 1763, after the conclusion of the French and Indian War, the French were forced to cede all their territory east of the Mississippi River to the English and all territory west of the Mississippi to the Spanish. At this time the Choctaw found themselves under the supposed dominion of their sometime enemy, sometime friend, the English. This situation did not last very

long since, with the conclusion of the American Revolution, the British were forced to cede their territory in southeastern North America to the United States, thus starting a long relationship between the U.S. and the Choctaw.

The United States and the Choctaw signed their first treaty in 1786, reaffirming the Choctaw boundaries and recognizing the Choctaw as a sovereign nation. From 1801 to 1830, the Choctaw signed a series of treaties with the United States which eventually lead to the cession of all their territory west of the Mississippi, some 32 million acres of land, and the removal to Indian Territory (Oklahoma) of most of the Choctaw. However, since the Choctaw's removal treaty, The Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek of 1830, was the first of the removal treaties, they got special consideration which none of the other tribes in the Southeast received. Any individual Choctaw who did not wish to go to Oklahoma, did not have to. They could remain in Mississippi, become U.S. citizens and be given a land grant based on the size of each family. Some 4,000 Choctaw chose not to leave the only home which they had ever know, despite a great deal of coercion designed to make them leave.

Despite the treaty only about 1,300 of the Choctaws who stayed were given the parcels of land guaranteed by the treaty and all were more or less forgotten about. By 1850, virtually none of the Choctaw who had been given reservations of land in Mississippi still retained them. They had been systematically swindled out of them or simply forced off the land by unscrupulous white settlers. Many of them then went to Oklahoma because they had no place else to go, but many still stayed on, unwilling to leave their homeland. The ones who stayed eked out a meager existence throughout the rest of the nineteenth century by living off the land and by becoming tenant farmers and sharecroppers on land that had once been theirs.

In the early part of the 20th century, the conditions under which the Choctaw were living were brought to the attention of the federal government. When the 1918 influenza epidemic/pandemic killed over ca. 25% percent of the Mississippi Choctaw, the federal government decided to step in to start helping the Choctaw. During the 1920s, the Bureau of Indian Affairs established elementary schools in the main Choctaw communities and the Choctaw Agency and a hospital in Philadelphia, Mississippi.

The Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians was finally officially recognized by the federal government in 1945. A tribal council was elected, but was little more than an advisory committee, set up to approve BIA decisions. However, as time went on, the Council gained more authority and expertise and eventually took over the direct administration of the Choctaw Reservation and the many programs and services which the tribe has established over the years. The Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians is today one of the most successful tribes in the country in the area of economic development. The tribe is among the top 10 manufacturing employers in the state. It owns an extremely successful casino, a world class golf course, is constructing a second casino and is well on the way to establishing a destination resort area which will bring tourists from all over the country and the world to the Mississippi and the Choctaw Reservation.