Mushulatubbee and Choctaw Removal: Chiefs Confront a Changing World

By: Greg O'Brien

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Article:

One of Mississippi's and the United States' most inhumane actions was the forced removal of American Indians from the South to lands west of the Mississippi River in the early 1800s.

Removal occurred because of an incessant demand for Indian lands. Demands for Indian land resulted from Anglo-American population growth in the South, the expansion of the short-staple cotton industry after Eli Whitney's cotton gin became widely available in the 1790s, the discovery of gold and other minerals on some Indian land, and simple racism.

It did not help Indians that the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 provided lands to the west to which the United States could banish them, or that by 1815 there was no longer a viable European ally in the area who could counteract American demands.

Indian Removal Act

The Mississippi Legislature passed a resolution that went into effect in January 1830 extending its jurisdiction over Choctaw and Chickasaw territories within the state. Many Indians opposed this move and appealed to the United States government for assistance. Others accepted this new state of affairs and sought the best terms possible.

With the passage by the U.S. Congress of the Indian Removal Act that same year, the legal mechanisms were put in place for President Andrew Jackson to negotiate with Indian groups for their deportation.

The Choctaws, Mississippi's largest Indian group, were the first southeastern Indians to accept removal with the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek in September 1830. The treaty provided that the Choctaws would receive land west of the Mississippi River in exchange for the remaining Choctaw lands in Mississippi. The Choctaws were given three years to leave Mississippi.

Trail of Tears

In the winter of 1830, Choctaws began migrating to Indian Territory (later Oklahoma) along the "trail of tears." The westward migrations continued over the following decades, and Indians remaining in Mississippi were forced to relinquish their communal land-holdings in return for small individually owned allotments.

Non-Indians rushed into the former Choctaw lands in Mississippi after 1830, producing the era often referred to in Mississippi history as the "flush times." Removal was a complicated process that found Indians and Euro-Americans on both sides of the fence: some people of both groups opposed removal, while others supported it.

Chief Mushulatubbee

Any attempt to understand Indian removal must include the role of Indian leaders such as Choctaw Chief Mushulatubbee. Even though other Choctaws made their voices heard, chiefs negotiated with the United States

government and signed the removal treaty. The reasons they agreed to such a drastic measure tells us much about their priorities and about their reactions to a rapidly changing world.

Choctaw Chief Mushulatubbee; Sketched by George Catlin in the 1830s. *Courtesy, Mississippi Department of Archives and History*

During his career, Mushulatubbee, a leading chief of the Choctaw eastern division, supported three treaties that yielded Choctaw lands to the United States. From at least the eighteenth century there existed among the Choctaws three principal geographic and political divisions: the western, eastern, and Six Towns (or southern) divisions. The western division villages were scattered around the upper Pearl River watershed, the eastern division towns were located around the upper Chickasawhay River and lower Tombigbee River watersheds, and the Six Towns were distributed along the upper Leaf River and mid-Chickasawhay River watersheds.

These divisions reflected the diverse ethnic origins and makeup of the Choctaws. Originally, the Choctaws were separate societies located throughout east-central Mississippi and west-central Alabama. These independent societies first joined together sometime after 1540 (when Hernando de Soto's expedition ravaged the Southeast with disease) and before 1699 (when the French arrived on the Gulf Coast). Each district maintained its own group of chiefs and other leaders well into the nineteenth century.

Mushulatubbee had become a chief after the death of his maternal uncle Mingo Homastubby in 1809. Mushulatubbee had earned the right to represent the eastern division as a chief by following the traditional Choctaw route to male success: he had distinguished himself in the spiritual realm by becoming an accomplished warrior and war leader, particularly during fighting against the Osage and Caddo Indians west of the Mississippi River.

A Market Economy

Until the late 1700s, Choctaws and their chiefs acquired European manufactured items, such as essential guns and wool cloth, by trading deerskins and other items to fur traders. By the early 1800s, however, deer were becoming scarce within present-day Mississippi, requiring the Choctaws to hunt west of the Mississippi River. Because of the scarcity of deer and the mounting Choctaw trade debts incurred by the Choctaws as a whole, chiefs such as Mushulatubbee sought new ways to maintain access to Euro-American goods, to generate income, and to augment their high status. Chiefs and other Choctaws who gained access to large quantities of manufactured goods could redistribute them to family and followers, thus securing power through reciprocal obligations. Moreover, early nineteenth-century chiefs recognized that American society paid the greatest respect to persons who controlled the most wealth. They knew that they must have material wealth to be taken seriously by the United States.

Thus, Choctaws, like Mushulatubbee and his family, entered the emerging market economy of early nineteenth-century America by raising and selling livestock and horses, owning African-American slaves, cultivating cotton, and marketing food products, baskets, and other sundry items. Beginning in 1819, Mushulatubbee and other chiefs welcomed Christian missionaries into the Choctaw nation. From the missionaries, Choctaw chiefs

and their families learned the English language, basic math, Christian teachings, new farming techniques, and other business-related skills.

Power Struggles

Although nearly every chief and elite Choctaw family pursued this basic outline of economic reform in the early nineteenth century, it did not mean they agreed with one another on other important issues. Factionalism ran rampant among Choctaw leaders as some of them sought to enhance their own position and power at the expense of more traditionally minded chiefs like Mushulatubbee.

Even though Mushulatubbee realized the deerskin trade was nearing its end, he remained devoted to a traditional political arrangement. Tradition required that leadership positions be inherited through the female line, that each of the three divisions retain autonomy, and that chiefs distributed goods and favors to their family and friends. His opponents, such as David Folsom and his family, claimed the right to lead even though they had never demonstrated their mastery of spiritual powers through war exploits or other traditional means.

Folsom was a son of deerskin trader Nathaniel Folsom and his Choctaw wife, and a distant cousin of Mushulatubbee. His wife, Rhoda Nail, was also the offspring of a European trader and Choctaw mother. Mushulatubbee's opponents' claim to power rested wholly within the material realm. These aspiring rulers sought a constitutional government that established a council of chiefs over the entire nation, supported private property ownership, initiated a new police force, and promoted inheritance through the male line.

Treaty of Doak's Stand

As both sides sought to gain their peoples' confidence, Mushulatubbee ended up supporting removal and land cessions as a tactic to bolster his notion of leadership. Beginning with the 1816 treaty between the Choctaws and the United States, Mushulatubbee was a signatory to land cessions that brought him gifts from the Americans. He then doled out these gifts to his supporters in the eastern division and to similarly minded folks in the western division. Traditionally, chiefs used such offerings to build up good will and reciprocal obligations.

In 1820 Mushulatubbee supported the Treaty of Doak's Stand that provided the Choctaws with land west of the Mississippi River (present-day Arkansas) in exchange for another cession of land in Mississippi and Alabama to the United States. Because few Choctaws emigrated to the new territory and since Americans had illegally claimed much of that land, Mushulatubbee and other leaders journeyed to Washington, D.C., in 1824 to cede that land back to the United States in return for further payments.

Meanwhile, the Folsoms and other opponents of Mushulatubbee set themselves up as defenders of Choctaw lands and rights by publicly deriding him for this cession. The tactic worked in the short run. Mushulatubbee was deposed from power and replaced by his nemesis David Folsom.

Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek

In the five years leading up to the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, Mushulatubbee let it be known to the Americans that he would support removal if they would, in turn, recognize him as the legitimate leader of the eastern division. Conversely, he also began to condemn the Christian missionaries and leaders like Folsom for abandoning traditional Choctaw ideology in favor of the cultural and moral traits of Americans.

Although he supported removal, Mushulatubbee appealed to the majority of Choctaw people as a champion of traditional rights. Thus, when the new western division leader Greenwood LeFlore, with the support of his allies the Folsoms, named himself head of the entire Choctaw nation in early 1830, Mushulatubbee condemned him so vociferously that the two sides nearly fought a pitched battle before LeFlore backed down.

Greenwood LeFlore's father, Louis, was French and his mother, Rebecca, was of mixed French-English-Choctaw heritage and related to the Six Towns leader Pushmataha. Leaders such as LeFlore and Folsom

promoted American-style education for their children and participated eagerly in the developing plantation economy of early Mississippi. Their attempts to replace traditional Choctaw notions of inheritance, government, and culture brought them into conflict with other chiefs like Mushulatubbee who, although also participating in the new market economy, espoused traditional notions of culture and authority.

Indeed, Mushulatubbee embodied contradiction. He supported removal and traditional prerogatives at the same time. Even though he signed the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek and migrated with his people to the west, Mushulatubbee blamed men like Folsom and LeFlore for the event. He also steadfastly refused to allow missionaries among his eastern division people in the west. He died of smallpox in 1838.

Once Choctaw chiefs became enmeshed in the American market system, they found their options severely limited as Americans tightened their grip on Choctaw lands. The key question with regard to Indian removal is not whether or not chiefs like Mushulatubbee were "sell-outs." Instead, the question is whether they realized that their successful participation in the economy and politics of the United States would only increase their dependence upon that same nation and thus help to create the mess they found themselves in by 1830.

Further reading:

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