

Pushmataha: Choctaw Warrior, Diplomat, and Chief

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Article:

Few Choctaws from the early 1800s are better known than Pushmataha. He negotiated several well-publicized treaties with the United States, led Choctaws in support of the Americans during the War of 1812, is mentioned in nearly all histories of the Choctaws, was famously painted by Charles Bird King in 1824, is buried in the Congressional Cemetery in Washington, D.C., and, in April 2001, a new Pushmataha portrait was unveiled to hang in the Hall of Fame of the State of Mississippi in the Old Capitol Museum in Jackson, Mississippi. Early twentieth-century ethnologist John Swanton referred to Pushmataha as the “greatest of all Choctaw chiefs.”¹

Despite his seeming familiarity, Pushmataha's life is not as well documented nor as well known as a careful biographer would like. What is known suggests that Pushmataha was an exceptional man and charismatic leader. He had deep roots in the ancient Choctaw world, a world characterized by spiritual power and traditional notions of culture. In addition, Pushmataha effectively confronted a rapidly changing era caused by the ever-expanding European and American presence.

Early life

Nearly all knowledge about Pushmataha's early life comes from the recollections of two men, only one of whom actually remembered meeting Pushmataha. Gideon Linsecum, a physician, philosopher, and naturalist, lived in the Tombigbee River region with his family from 1818 until the mid-1830s. He wrote about his experiences among the Choctaws decades later. Horatio Cushman, the son of Protestant missionaries sent to Mississippi in 1820, published a rambling book in 1899 on the history of the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Natchez Indians. Cushman's book suffers from an imperfect, and often condescending, understanding of Indian culture.²

Despite this potentially inaccurate information, basic facts about Pushmataha's younger years can be established by fitting what Linsecum and Cushman had to say into our more complete knowledge of Choctaw culture and history. Pushmataha was apparently born around 1764 on the Noxubee River near present-day Macon, Mississippi. According to Linsecum, he involved himself in warfare from an early age, initially against the Creek Indians. The Choctaws and Creeks fought a long war from 1765 until 1777. That would leave Pushmataha at a very young age to participate in that conflict, particularly in the leadership role that Linsecum ascribes to him.³

Great warrior

All Choctaw Indian boys readily participated in war parties as soon as the older men allowed. Warfare was basic to male success; boys did not become men or earn a title until they participated in a successful war party. On the other hand, women held innate spiritual power through their ability to create life through childbirth. Success in war proved to everyone that a Choctaw male had mastered at least a minimum amount of spiritual power, since spiritual protection and performance of special rituals was absolutely necessary to military triumph. Those who excelled as war leaders — such as Pushmataha — were expected to assume larger roles within Choctaw society as diplomats and chiefs. Pushmataha earned his renown as a warrior and war leader in fighting against the Caddo and Osage Indians west of the Mississippi River.

Choctaws had always traveled periodically throughout the lower Mississippi River Valley, but by the 1770s they were forced to travel farther afield for their annual deer hunts. Ever since Britain had become the major European power in the Gulf Coast region after the Seven Years War ended in 1763, hundreds of unregulated fur traders poured into Choctaw country seeking to exchange rum and other European goods with the Southeastern Indians for deerskins. Choctaws thus killed more deer than ever before and quickly depleted the deer herds in their hunting territory east of the Mississippi. As a result, it became necessary for Choctaws to travel to new hunting lands west of the river.

Other Indian groups, such as the Osages and Caddos, already lived in those western lands and they resented the Choctaws intruding into their hunting territories. Because Choctaws, especially Pushmataha and other young men, wanted access to the deer in the west and needed to participate in war in order to become men, sporadic warfare between the Choctaws and groups like the Osages and Caddos continued throughout the late 1700s and early 1800s.

Pushmataha's war exploits became famous throughout the lower Mississippi Valley. He killed numerous enemies of the Choctaws, often single-handedly, while escaping injury and capture, and he led other Choctaw warriors in successful attacks. Although the details of Pushmataha's war exploits as portrayed by Lincecum and Cushman stretch believability, there is little doubt that Pushmataha achieved greatness as a warrior. All of these military actions earned the respect of other Choctaws, and several chiefs and spiritual leaders bestowed the title which we know him by today. Pushmataha, or rather "Apushamatahahubi," means "a messenger of death; literally one whose rifle, tomahawk, or bow is alike fatal in war or hunting."⁴

A mystery surrounding Pushmataha is the identity of his parents. They may have been killed by the Creeks or other enemies of the Choctaws when he was young, as Lincecum reported. Most likely they were commoners because Pushmataha expressed uneasiness about his kin ties throughout his life. There existed leading or elite families among the Choctaws, and formal leadership positions were often passed down through the generations of these families. Pushmataha had no such kinship connections, but his exceptional record of achievement based upon the traditional measures of success in war and mastery of spiritual powers meant that he should assume a chiefly position. Even Choctaws who could possibly inherit a chiefly role had to first demonstrate their abilities in war and the spiritual realm. Such accomplished men who had been molded by traditional Choctaw notions of proper behavior could be counted upon to conduct themselves in constructive ways with foreigners and to protect Choctaw interests. Accordingly, such men became diplomats and represented their people in meetings with Europeans, Americans, and other Indians.

Diplomat and chief

As an adult, Pushmataha resided in the Six Towns Division of the Choctaw Confederacy, and it was that division he represented in diplomatic meetings. 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, and the eastern division towns were located around the upper Chickasawhay River and lower Tombigbee River watersheds. The Six Towns were distributed along the upper Leaf River and mid-Chickasawhay River watersheds.

Sometime around 1800 Pushmataha became a leading chief and began playing a major role in negotiations with other peoples, especially the Americans. He quickly developed a well-deserved reputation for his eloquent speaking abilities, and he was able to persuade both Choctaws and Americans with his sharp logic and lyrical speaking style. The first formal treaty with the United States that he took part in was the Fort Confederation meeting in 1802. From that point onward, Pushmataha played an important role in all dealings between the Choctaws and the United States.

When the neighboring Creek Indians, then located in present-day Alabama, killed more than 500 Americans at Fort Mims, Pushmataha assumed his position as war leader. He quickly organized a Choctaw military force to assist General Andrew Jackson in fighting against the Creeks.

Pushmataha and Andrew Jackson

For that assistance, Jackson was forever grateful, but when the American general returned to Choctaw country in 1820 to negotiate the Treaty of Doak's Stand, which called for Choctaw removal to lands west of the Mississippi River, Pushmataha resisted. The lands in the west (present-day Arkansas) were too poor to support agriculture and hunting, Pushmataha told Jackson. In addition, Pushmataha pointed out that white settlers already lived on those lands. He knew that they would not leave voluntarily simply because the U.S. government had decided that those lands now belonged to the Choctaws.

Pushmataha tried to get a promise from Jackson to evict the white settlers, but this issue was never settled and it brought Pushmataha and other chiefs to Washington D.C. in 1824. They sought compensation for those Arkansas lands that they could never settle because of the large numbers of whites already living there. During the 1824 negotiations, Pushmataha became sick and died. He was buried with full military honors in the Congressional Cemetery in Washington, D.C.

What are we to make of Pushmataha's life? On one level he was the last of his kind: a chief who came to power through traditional means by performing great war deeds and demonstrating his mastery of spiritual powers. He resisted attempts of the United States to take away Choctaw lands. He is often portrayed as culturally conservative and as an opponent of the Protestant missionaries who arrived among the Choctaws beginning in 1818.

A changing Indian world

Like all chiefs of his generation, Pushmataha knew that the Indian world was changing rapidly. He tried to ensure that his offspring would be able to participate in leading roles in that new world. He sent one of his sons, who had already been taught how to speak English and to read and write by American officials, to a missionary school in 1820. Pushmataha, a man who had risen from commoner to great status, attempted to preserve that elite status for his own children. In that new world business skills determined success, while the spiritual powers of Pushmataha's era meant less and less for chiefs and other elites. Thus, Pushmataha represents a major transitional figure in Mississippi history: a man with deep roots in a traditional past who also realized that major changes were required by Choctaws for them to compete on an equal footing with Americans.

End notes:

¹ John Swanton, *Source Material for the Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians* (Smithsonian Institution: Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin no. 103, 1931), 4.

² Gideon Lincecum, "Life of Apushmataha," *Mississippi Historical Society Publications* (1906) 9:415-485; and H. B. Cushman, *History of the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Natchez Indians* (originally published in 1899; reprinted Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).

³ On the Choctaw-Creek war see Greg O'Brien, "Protecting Trade through War: Choctaw Elites and British Occupation of the Floridas," Martin Daunton and Rick Halpern, eds., *Empire and Others: British Encounters with Indigenous Peoples, 1600-1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 149-166.

⁴ Swanton, *Source Material for the Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians*, 121

Further reading

James Taylor Carson, *Searching for the Bright Path: The Mississippi Choctaws from Prehistory to Removal* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).

H. B. Cushman, *History of the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Natchez Indians* (originally published 1899; reprinted Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).

Clara Sue Kidwell, *Choctaws and Missionaries in Mississippi, 1818-1918* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995).

Gideon Lincecum, "Life of Apushmataha," *Mississippi Historical Society Publications* (1906) 9:415-485.

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John Swanton, *Source Material for the Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians* (Smithsonian Institution: Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin no. 103, 1931).

Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).