

Who Are Choctaw Freedmen?

Factsheet

Banner Photo: Closing Day at Oak Hill Academy for Choctaw Freedmen, 1912.

Introduction

The Oklahoma Freedmen Collective is a group of Five Tribes Freedmen and Friends of Freedmen dedicated to genealogical research, storytelling, and community. One part of our mission is to educate the public on freedmen history. We created this factsheet to provide a brief history of African-descended peoples of the Choctaw Nation and to shed light on common misconceptions.

Timeline

- **Origins (pre-1800).** Choctaws of African-descent are a people with a history forged in the colonial origins of the United States. Their ancestors were West and Central Africans with languages and cultures of their own. These ancestors were taken, enslaved, and sold in the Americas. They were brought to the Choctaw homelands of present-day Mississippi and Louisiana. Here they lived with white settlers, Choctaws living traditional lifestyles, and Choctaws of blended European and native life ways.
- **Life in present-day Mississippi & Louisiana (early 1800s).** In earlier times, slavery resembled tribal slavery and there were better relations to black people before chattel slavery became prominent by mixed bloods.
- **Indian Removal and Indian Territory (1830s-1850s).** After the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, free people of African descent, enslaved people of African descent, and other Choctaw community members arrived during the removal period of the 1830s. African Choctaws build new lives in Indian territory. They farm and work in Doaksville, Skullyville, Boggy Depot, and other towns of the Choctaw Nation.



Bow (Tanamp shibata) used by a Choctaw Freedman. used to shoot birds fish and squirrels in Latimer County at least a hundred years ago. *Choctaw Nation Capitol Museum Collection.*

• **Civil War and Post-War Era (1860s-1880s).** Treaty of 1866 & Emancipation. Leaders of the Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations sign a new treaty with the United States. The treaty emancipated people held as slaves in both the Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations. The Choctaw Nation officially adopted the former slaves of that nation and their descendants in 1885. During the same timeframe, black codes in the Nation were enhanced. The Choctaw Nation established Cedar Grove, Clarksville, Dog Creek, Ft. Coffee, and Opossum Creek Freedmen Schools. The population in the Cedar Grove area was a diverse one where some of the children were citizens of the Chickasaw Nation and as well as Choctaw Nation. The tribal council also created Tushka Lusa Institute, a boarding school designed for around 30 freedmen students. In 1892, the tribal council approved over seven thousand dollars for the school. The Oak Hill Academy for freedmen was established by Presbyterians. Freedmen also organized the Choctaw Freedmen Association and Choctaw-Chickasaw Freedmen Association to advance community wellbeing.

• **Dawes Era & Tribal Disestablishment (1898-1907).** Immediately before statehood, the Choctaw Freedmen population was 5,254 people. In 1904, an election was held for Principal Chief of the Choctaw Nation. The Tuskahoma Party included a platform to appeal specifically to Freedmen.

• **Statehood and Jim Crow (1907-1965).** Choctaw Freedmen continue to worship and build community within churches. For example, members of the Oak Hill Presbyterian church purchased land west of Valliant for a new chapel in 1912.

• **Indian Reorganization and Disenrollment (1965 - 1985).** In the 1980s when the Choctaw Nation made revisions to its constitution, in the constitution, like the other former slave holding tribes, the descendants of Freedmen were excluded from the nation officially. A policy that continues to this day.

• **Modern Era (1985 - present).** After more than a century since statehood, thousands of Choctaw Freedmen live within Oklahoma and across the United States.



Choctaw Freedmen connected to Oak Hill Academy. Rev. and Maria Jones Dands (top), Fredonia Perkins Allen and Fidelin Perkins Murchison (middle), and George Shoals (below). *Robert Flickinger. The Choctaw freedmen and the story of Oak Hill Industrial Academy (1914).*

Common Misconceptions: Asked and Answered

Question	Answer
Didn't the Choctaw Nation fight in the American Civil War for sovereignty? Not to to keep slavery?	Maintaining slaveholding was a key interest of Choctaw Nation leadership. Wealthy and influential leaders in the nation such as R.M. Jones and Peter Pitchlynn saw chattel slavery as a vital element of the national economy.
Wasn't chattel slavery amongst the 5 Southeastern Tribes less harsh and closer to kinship? Weren't the enslaved Africans refugees or indentured servants?	Within the Choctaw Nation, enslaved persons were bought, sold, and held as chattel before 1866. Slave sale records and estate probates establish that this holding was analogous to the slaveholding of the Antebellum south. Additionally, enslaved people uprisied to protest their enslavement. The basis of Choctaw Freedmen citizenship is treaty rights and tribal adoption. Even before European contact, Choctaws, have a history of making relations with new individuals and groups through adoptive mechanisms. Freedmen descend from enslaved and free persons of color from Africa. Some people are also of mixed European and indigenous ancestry.
What about blood quantum? Shouldn't freedmen be excluded from the Choctaw Nation due to blood quantum?	No. The trans-Atlantic Slave Trade was a real and horrifying historic event. Most African-Americans and Freedmen of the Five Tribes have ancestors descendent from enslaved people from West and Central Africa that arrived in the present-day United States through the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.
Are African-Americans the "real" indigenous peoples of the Americas?	

Additional Reading

To learn more, explore the following books about people of African-descent of the Choctaw Nation:

- "Black Slaves, Indian Masters: Slavery, Emancipation, and Citizenship in the Native American South" - Barbara Krauthamer
- "Freedmen of the Frontier Volume 1: Selected Cherokee, Choctaw, & Chickasaw Freedmen Families" - Angela Walton-Raji

COUNTY: Wapanucka, S. I. Choctaw Nation. Freedmen Roll. CARD No. 1025
FIELD No. 1025

NAME	Relationship to Person first Named	AGE	SEX	TRIBAL ENROLLMENT			SLAVE OF—	REMARKS
				Year	County	No.		
Williams, Joana		23	F	1896	Atoka	2370		
Gardner, Bird	Son	5	M	1896	"	1681		
" Clay	"	2	"					new born.
Williams, Elizabeth	Daughter	11 Mo	F					

Banner Photo: Dawes Card of Joana Williams and relatives.