

THE CHICKASAW NATION OF NORTH ALABAMA

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As proven by radio-carbon dating of artifacts from the Stanfield-Worley Shelter, prehistoric people had been living in North Alabama 10,000 years ago. When I was a child I walked the cotton-field hoeing and picking cotton and finding arrowheads that I thought the "Indians" left. Today we know some of these were produced thousands of years ago. We say those people lived in the Stone Age because their tools were made of stone.

By 1600 four major Indian tribes lived in what is today Alabama: the Choctaw in the southwest; the largest tribe, the Creeks in the Southeast; the Cherokee in the northeast; and the Chickasaw in the northwest of today's Alabama. In 1736 a Scotsman, James Logan Colbert, came from Scotland to Georgia as a young man fleeing religious persecution. He obtained pack mules and trade goods to trade with the Chickasaw. He made several trips bringing iron implements, cloth, guns, whiskey etc. We, settlers, were teaching the Native people to "want." For thousands of years the Indians had lived in harmony with nature, now they were killing animals for pelts to trade for "wants." Finally, James Logan Colbert settled down with the Chickasaw, "marrying" three Chickasaw wives. The Chickasaw practiced polygamy and were a matriarchal society. The children belonged to the mother and at her death to her brothers. So, if your mother was Chickasaw, you were Chickasaw. Colbert produced a large family of children. This was to become more and more common---frontiersmen producing half-blood families as Americans pushed westward into the frontier.

The Chickasaw lived in villages near today's Tupelo and Pontotoc, Mississippi. The Chickasaw had two houses; one for summer (rectangular with a thatch roof) and one for winter, (called a hot house) that was round made from posts driven into the ground and plastered with a mud mixture and having a thatch roof. They supplemented hunted game with gardens growing squash, beans, corn and pumpkins. They also dug roots and gathered nuts and berries. The men hunted and made war; the women did the other work of homemaking and gardening. One unusual custom was that they buried their dead where they died. The Chickasaw land claims extended east to near Huntsville, Alabama today, north to

the Ohio River, west into Mississippi, and south to near Jackson Mississippi of today.

During the American Revolution the Chickasaw sided with the British. Tories moved among the Chickasaw and half-blood families grew. But, the Colberts were the first half-blood family among the Chickasaw. They ruled the Chickasaw nation for more than 100 years even after their removal to what became Oklahoma.

During the American Revolution the Chickasaw supported the British. Many Tories moved west into the Chickasaw territories and half-blood families grew. Then, in autumn 1783, the patriarch, James Logan Colbert with his slave, Caesar, took his youngest son, James, down to St. Augustine, Florida to be apprenticed to a trading company, Panton, Leslie, & Co. to get an education. We all want a better life for our children. He wanted James to learn to keep a store. We know these facts because James Logan Colbert sent a letter on Nov. 12, 1783 to a trading company in the Bahamas in which he asked for money owed to him and told about his son, James.

Leaving his son there, James Logan Colbert left St. Augustine with Caesar in December 1783 on his trip home. He stopped for a few days rest at his friend, Lachlan McGillivray's, plantation near present day Auburn, Alabama. As a Tory Lachlan had fled to Scotland during the Revolution, leaving his half-blood Creek son, Alexander McGillivray (Red Eagle), in charge of the plantation. In early January James Logan Colbert and Caesar headed north for home in what became North Alabama. A few days after leaving, Caesar returned to Alexander McGillivray to tell him that his master was thrown from his horse and killed instantly. Caesar said he buried him where he fell according to Chickasaw custom. We know this because in a letter dated January 7, 1784 McGillivray wrote to Panton, Lesley and Co. to let James know what had happened to his father.

By the 1780s the second generation of Colberts had married. William Colbert married a half-blood Creek who was a sister to Alexander McGillivray's wife. George married two sisters, daughters of the future Cherokee Chief Doublehead. George moved into his father's "old place" after his death. Levi Colbert had two full-blood Chickasaw sisters as wives. James returned from St. Augustine by 1789

and could read and speak English. He later became the interpreter for the government at a salary of \$400 per year. James married a half-blood Choctaw, Susan James, whose father was the agent to the Choctaw. Susan Colbert the youngest child of James Logan Colbert, married a white man, James Allen. Thus, like the Biblical kings, the Colberts had marital connections with the major southeastern tribes and with the Americans. With the next generation, the trend continued.

It is amazing to me to think that George, Levi, and James Colbert were on a first name basis with presidents such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Andrew Jackson and many times visited presidents at the White House. That Jackson spent the night at George Colbert's house is awe inspiring. Who of us can claim that kind of connection with national leaders?

The story of our cheating the Chickasaw of their land takes little more than 100 years and included such tactics as President Jefferson's policy of establishing trading "factories," or store houses as a means of political management. Loan sharks are certainly not a new fad.

For centuries the Indians had lived in harmony with nature to meet their needs. Now they far over-hunted their land to get pelts to trade for overpriced trade goods that they WANTED. We taught them to want. Jefferson's plan was devised to entice the Indians to trade on credit until the Chickasaw Nation piled up a debt for which they had nothing to trade but their land. The first trading post was at Council Bluffs, what we call Memphis. One trading post was to be located locally where the Natchez Trace originally crossed the Tennessee River at Riverton. Payday loans are nothing new.

In 1801 by treaty the Chickasaw and Choctaw allowed the government to cut a post road through their territory to let mail move from Nashville to Natchez. In the treaty the Colberts had written that only Indians could operate ferries and inns for travelers along the road. Of the two major rivers William Colbert operated the ferry over the Duck River and George operated the one over the Tennessee. George also used his influence to have the Corp of Engineers build himself a house at the ferry site.

In 1805 President Jefferson had his way when in July to pay their debt totaling more than \$20,000 at various trading posts the Chickasaw gave up all their land in

Kentucky and most of the land in Tennessee. Since almost none of the Indians could read or write what was to keep the government store keeper from adding items not purchased or charging unfair amounts to those who could only mark their X for their name. Yet, all Chickasaw owned everything in common and owed everything in common.

By 1805 Levi had become the beloved chief of the Chickasaw Nation. In the Creek Indian War and the following battle of New Orleans that culminated the War of 1812 with the British the Colberts fought alongside Andrew Jackson. Then in 1815, George and James Colbert visited the president in Washington, D. D. as was often to happen in the coming years. In 1816 at a council held at George's house at Georgetown on the banks of the Tennessee River, Andrew Jackson, John Coffee, and other government representatives met with the Colberts and other Chickasaw leaders for several days culminating with a bribe of 12 square miles directly across the river from George's ferry site and house, George and Levi agreed to give up all the Chickasaw land north of the Tennessee River and all the land south of the river that was east of Cain Creek (where Colbert Steam Plant sets today). George and Levi had to agree to sell the bribe land to a secret buyer, who turned out to be James Jackson for \$20,000. James Jackson later built his famous plantation, Forks of Cypress, on that land.

This 1816 Treaty left the final little portion of Chickasaw land in the present-day western section of Colbert County over into Mississippi south to below Tupelo out of the vast claim of only 25 years before. In 1818, Benjamin Smith was sent to take a census listing by clan every then living Chickasaw, thus if you claim Chickasaw lineage—you should trace your family to that census. Andrew Jackson came to visit the Colberts in the fall of 1818. He warned the Chickasaw that they did not have deeds to their claims of land and white veterans of the American Revolution did have such "patents." Jackson gave bribes to each of the then living Colbert brothers: George, Levi, James, and William.

The U. S. government began in earnest to prepare the Indian tribes east of the Mississippi River give up their land and move west. Congress passed the Indian Civilization Act in 1819. This act asked churches to send missionaries to help in the work of civilizing the Indians. The act allowed teaching of religion if the Indians were also taught academic and civilizing skills of farming and

housekeeping. Rev. Thomas Stuart of the South Carolina Synod came to visit the southern tribes. The Creeks and Choctaw refused the offer, but Levi Colbert as chief agreed to a one-year trial of a school for Chickasaw youth at Pontotoc beginning in 1822. The success of this day-school brought the founding of four more—one on the west side of Cane Creek in the Red Rock community, of Colbert County today, opened its doors January 15, 1827, and closed with Chickasaw removal. Caney Creek Chickasaw School opened with 35 boarding students who were expected to learn English first before tackling other academic subjects such as reading, math, and geography. There also were demonstration farming and housekeeping lessons.

A new Chickasaw agent, Benjamin Smith was named October 18, 1823. His first order of business was to get a new agency building constructed. He chose a site on Agency Creek, now called Malone Creek, about a mile downstream from the boundary of Cane Creek and approximately 75 miles northeast of the previous Agency site south of Tupelo, Mississippi. The first post office in the Chickasaw Nation was in this building July 8, 1829. With the opening of the post office, Benjamin Smith became the post master and Benjamin Reynolds became the Chickasaw agent and remained so until after Chickasaw removal. This building burned while being operated as a store by John L. Malone circa 1900. Ample evidence of the agency is present today including a huge spring to supply water. Each move by the U. S. government was planned to move the Indians away from their traditions and ties to their homeland.

President Jackson, John Coffee and other government officials called the Chickasaw leaders to a meeting at a small church in Franklin, Tennessee on October 20, 1830. The Chickasaw leaders, with the Colberts in charge, left the agency site and walked up the Natchez Trace to the conference. The Indians were told they would give up their land, more than six million, five hundred thousand acres, and move west willingly or force would be used. The treaty was signed by Levi Colbert for removal to come when suitable land was found. A committee led by Levi Colbert and Chickasaw agent Benjamin Reynolds did go to Indian Territory, Oklahoma today, and stayed several weeks, but no suitable land was found. Thus, the 1830 Removal Treaty was never presented to Congress for approval.

In September 1832 John Coffee came to the traditional Chickasaw Council House at Pontotoc Creek, now Pontotoc, Mississippi, to propose assigning reservations to Chickasaw families as requested by the Colberts. These reservations could be sold by the Chickasaw owner to individuals rather than a gross amount given by the government for total Chickasaw lands. This treaty allowed each Chickasaw single adult male (aged 17 or older) to receive 640 acres; a Chickasaw family of five or fewer members received 1,280 acres; the allotment size increased in proportion to family size. Excess acres, not needed for reservation allotment, was to be sold at auction to the highest bidder. Reservations were selected by the Chickasaw for value such as near a spring, river, or improvements already made such as a house or plantation. This treaty was approved by Congress. John Bell of Cotton Gin Port, son of missionaries, was given the contract to survey the land. The sales were to begin when surveying was complete. But, unscrupulous buyers got liens on the reservations by those "WANT" sales to the unwary Native Americans.

Grumbling among the Chickasaw people about the 1832 Treaty's omission of widows and orphans receiving reservations caused a group of leaders to meet at the Chickasaw Agency site in mid-March 1834 to travel to Washington to amend the 1832 Treaty. Levi Colbert became ill at the Agency; was placed in the back of a wagon and taken to his daughter's home where he died on June 2, 1834. Levi gave his brother, George the right to act as chief; travel on to Washington and work out the Amended Treaty of 1834 that removed the Chickasaw.

The land survey was completed in May 1836. The first Chickasaw left on the Trail of Tears in July 1837. The final Chickasaw left their homeland in the summer of 1846. The first land auction of Chickasaw land was in Huntsville on the first Monday in January 1836. Land sales were held in Huntsville, Alabama and at Pontotoc, Mississippi. As chief, George Colbert, by now an old man, made numerous trips leading contingents of his people West. He died at Fort Towson near Doaksville, Indian Territory November 7, 1839. He was buried with his saddle, bridal, and two ceremonial swords, one given by President Washington and one by President Jefferson, and an American flag. The grave was unmarked and now is unknown.

Most of the men who had led the Chickasaw died during this stressful Trail of Tears time for the Chickasaw. In 100 years the United States government removed the Chickasaw and owned their land.

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