

The Mississippi Choctaw and Racial Politics

In December of 1912, Mississippi Representative Pat Harrison stood before Congress and made an impassioned speech on behalf of the Choctaw Indians living in his district along the Gulf Coast. In a heavily edited version of the past, Harrison announced, “Mr. Chairman, the Choctaw Indians always stood with the white men of the South.”¹ These Indians were the descendants of those who had remained in Mississippi when the Choctaw Nation ceded its territory in Mississippi, and the majority of Choctaws moved to Indian Territory, today Oklahoma, in the 1830s. Left landless, most Choctaws had withdrawn into isolated, poverty-stricken ethnic enclaves where virtually all survived as sharecroppers and low-paid day laborers. While the Choctaws were not officially classified under the segregation statutes as “colored,” they nonetheless suffered discrimination because of customary racial segregation. They had no access to “white” schools or other facilities. Yet Harrison and the Mississippi congressional delegation, all ardent supporters of segregation, were seeking redress for the injustice the Indians had suffered in the removal era and more recently when the United States closed the roll of the Choctaw Nation in Oklahoma, excluding most Mississippi Choctaws from the benefits stemming from Choctaw Nation citizenship. Their support of the Choctaws puts an interesting kink in the state’s racial politics.

The efforts of the congressmen reflected how the Choctaws' relationship to Mississippi politicians had changed: in the nineteenth century, politicians had answered the Indians' cries for justice with renewed attempts to hound them out of the state. The willingness of Mississippi's civic leaders to carry the Choctaws' banner in the early twentieth century raises significant questions. Why did these men bother with the Choctaws, who, disenfranchised and impoverished, could neither vote nor contribute to their campaign chests? Why this interest in a non-white minority from men passionately committed to white supremacy? What does this crusade on behalf of the Mississippi Choctaws reveal about racial attitudes in the biracial south and the place of Indians in this system? The answers to these questions lie not only in the material expectations of politicians but also in the ways they used Choctaws as a symbol for the region's most sacred values.

The Mississippians argued that the federal government, not the state, had an obligation to help the Choctaws because their troubles stemmed from the failure of the United States to honor the commitments it made in Article 14 of the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, the removal treaty negotiated in 1830 between the Choctaw Nation and the United States. There were two bases for the complaint. First, Article 14 promised that all Choctaws who wanted to stay in Mississippi and become citizens of the state (and subject to its repressive racial laws) could do so if they registered appropriately with their agent William Ward, who would issue them an allotment of land. Ward was an inept drunkard who

refused to enroll the majority of qualified Indians. Furthermore, even some of those who did receive allotments lost their land when Mississippi citizens threatened them with arrest, whipped them, and drove them out of their homes, claiming that they had bought them at auction.

Throughout the 1840s the Choctaws remaining in Mississippi fought for their lands, but by the end of the decade it was clear that they would not prevail. They then withdrew into their own communities, most located on public land in east-central Mississippi and along the Gulf Coast, where they scratched out a bare subsistence. These Choctaws did not intermingle with either whites or blacks, spoke their native language almost exclusively, and perpetuated a Choctaw worldview and identity. The few scattered accounts of white interaction with the Choctaws in the 1850s express contempt for the Indians. In *Mississippi Scenes*, published in 1851, a wealthy planter named Joseph Beckham Cobb wrote that the Choctaw were cowardly, duplicitous, filthy, and mean, “hardly above the animals.” In the racial hierarchy in Mississippi, Indians were at the very bottom: “Although slaves for life, and begetting slaves, I do not know a negro that would countenance an exchange of situations with a Choctaw or Chickasaw Indian.”²

After the Civil War, Mississippians mellowed a bit, largely because they found a use for the Choctaws. As many African Americans moved to the delta, Choctaws took their place in the cotton fields in east central Mississippi. Had it not been for the declining productivity of this land and the arrival of the boll

weevil Congressman Harrison might not have been quite so passionate in his quest for justice, but by 1912, a better opportunity to profit from the Choctaws emerged.

The second basis for demands that the United States help Mississippi's Choctaws only became apparent with the passage of the Curtis Act in 1898. In 1887 Congress had passed the General Allotment or Dawes Act which sought to destroy Indian tribalism by allotting lands to individuals and assimilating them into non-Indian American culture. The Curtis Act extended the policy of allotment and assimilation to the five southern tribes that had been removed to Indian Territory, which originally had been exempt. Mississippi Senator John Sharp Williams joined with the Oklahoma Choctaws in urging inclusion of the Mississippi Choctaw in the implementation of this policy. Although there were no tribal lands in Mississippi to allot, politicians hoped to secure land for the Mississippi Choctaws in Oklahoma and transportation at United States' expense to claim their lands. The Curtis Act authorized a commission to determine who should be included on the allotment rolls, and commissioners went to Mississippi to compile a roll of eligible Choctaws. They determined that approximately 1,923 Choctaws were entitled to allotments in and removal to Oklahoma if they acted within six months.

The process was seriously flawed. Appropriations were insufficient for the government to cover the expenses of all Choctaws who wanted to go, so

contractors conveyed many in exchange for payment or a lien on their allotments. Furthermore, some landowners did everything they could to thwart the exodus of their labor force. Choctaws who wanted to claim land never had an opportunity to do so or they discovered that the commission had ruled them ineligible for enrollment. Nevertheless, the federal government closed the Choctaw Nation rolls in 1907, by which time roughly 1,634 Mississippi Choctaws had relocated to Oklahoma, while approximately one thousand remained in Mississippi. The closing of the rolls, the federal government maintained, forever cut them off from the Choctaw Nation.

Although they had not gone to Oklahoma and received allotments, Mississippi Choctaws maintained that they had an ongoing interest in the other resources that citizens of the Choctaw Nation continued to hold in common, in particular, gas and oil leases. The federal government distributed royalties from these leases to citizens of the Choctaw Nation, that is, those whose names appeared on the final roll. Relying on a provision in Article 14 of the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek that “persons who claim [land in Mississippi] under this article shall not lose the privilege of a Choctaw citizen, but if they ever remove, are not entitled to any portion of the Choctaw annuity,” a group of claimants hired lawyers and asserted their rights as citizens of the Choctaw Nation. In their view, this clause in Article 14 entitled them to share in the assets of the Choctaw Nation in Oklahoma without moving west. They regarded a share of the assets as a

legitimate treaty right under Article 14 and as compensation for dispossession by Agent Ward. In 1912 one of these petitioners persuaded Congressman Harrison to introduce a bill to reopen the rolls of the Choctaw Nation so that qualified Article 14 claimants could be added to the roll and receive funds from the tribe's oil and gas leases. This began a six-year legal battle over the rights of the Mississippi Choctaw.

By the time the Mississippi congressional delegation took up the Choctaw cause, attitudes toward the Indians had changed. In 1880 Colonel J.F.H. Claiborne, who had led the charge to remove the remaining Choctaws in the 1840s, now bemoaned the tragedy of their dispossession in his work, *Mississippi as a Province, Territory, and State*. He referred to the Indians as “those noble natives of our soil” and mourned their fate: “Sadly and sorrowfully they lingered around their former homes, in poverty and humiliation, or wandered into the swamps in search of food, and perished from exposure and hunger.” Claiborne laid the blame for the Choctaws’ suffering largely on the federal government, which had failed to provide promised resources. Furthermore, he castigated “religionists of the north” for neglecting to intervene in this disgraceful mess because they were “employed to stir up strife between the sections, calumniate their southern brethren, and lay the foundations for fratricidal war! May the Father of Mercy forgive them!” Despite his earlier attempts to drive them from the state, Claiborne now found true nobility in the Choctaws’ fervent love of their

homelands: “This is the foundation of all patriotism. The most heroic actions in history spring from this source. In the South, it should be cultivated and impressed on our children; the first lesson in every household should be ‘God and our native soil.’”³ These words intimate why southerners might have shifted from loathing to lamenting the Indians. In the years following Reconstruction, Mississippians recast the Choctaws’ refusal to emigrate, which they had viewed as ignorant intransigence in the 1830s, as a tragically doomed defense of their homelands from incursions by a stronger power. The parallels to the southern experience with invasion were obvious.

In the 1890s others who had grown up with the Choctaws in Mississippi sentimentalized the “noble red men” they had known. In 1894 Horatio Bardwell Cushman, whose parents had been missionaries to the Choctaws, composed his *History of the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Natchez Indians*, which portrayed the Choctaws as quintessential “noble savages.” In the 1898 *American Antiquarian and Oriental Journal*, John A. Watkins, who lived near the Choctaws before removal, declared them, “a moral people” incapable of deception. Similarly, Newton County resident A.J. Brown, who grew up near a Choctaw community, published a county history in 1895 that proclaimed that “in their primeval state,” the Choctaws were “the most honest, virtuous people of which we have account.” In support for these positive views, each author cited the Choctaws’ history of defending the United States in general and noted the actions of their chief

Pushmataha in particular. Many also believed that the remnant Choctaws had proven themselves worthy of help since they had been “remarkably peaceful, law abiding, and industrious” for many decades despite their terrible mistreatment.⁴ Although the Choctaws’ supporters acknowledged that some Indians had succumbed to alcoholism, they blamed this behavior on the pernicious influences of “the lower grade of white people” in their midst. Belle Scott, teacher in a Choctaw school in the 1890s, referred to these men as “a semi-barbarous white element infesting certain localities in Mississippi.”⁵ The Choctaw were now the noblest of noble savages and, as such, they also were disappearing.

The “vanishing Indian” was a popular view of Native peoples in the late nineteenth century. Although he wrote about Choctaws still living in his neighborhood, Brown grieved the Choctaws’ demise. “They have gone from our midst,” he wrote, “A peculiar people has passed away” leaving only a remnant that was fast-declining due to pulmonary disease.⁶ Seeing Choctaws reduced to a few thousand people struggling with poverty, Mississippians concluded that they were in the process of fading from history. Educators who worked among the Choctaws in the late nineteenth century complicated this idea, however, simultaneously noting the Choctaws’ continued Indian identity—seen in their use of their native language, their closed communities, their attachment to their ancestral homelands, and their continued Choctaw worldview—and their “progress”—notably their acceptance of Christianity and their willingness to send

their children to school. This tension between the vanishing and the progressing Indians inspired Cushman, Watkins, Claiborne, and others to publish accounts of Choctaw “traditional” culture in the 1880s and 1890s, before their growing “progress” caused them to fade away.⁷

Reflecting the new concern for the Mississippi Choctaws and seizing the opportunity to profit from the wrongs done them, the Mississippi Congressional delegation led by Pat Harrison leapt to the barricades. Over his eight years in the House of Representatives, Congressman Harrison spent more time attempting to win resources for the Mississippi Choctaws than he did on any other piece of legislation, introducing and modifying enrollment bills at least four times. Representatives Percy E. Quin of the seventh district, which included the western Gulf Coast; William Webb Venable, who represented the fifth district in the sand-clay hills where the majority of Choctaws lived; and Senators James Kimble Vardaman and John Sharp Williams joined the fight. As members of the Mississippi Democratic Party, these men were committed to segregation and white supremacy, and yet they campaigned for a group who were legally classified as “colored” and effectively disfranchised. In hearings for the Harrison bill Senator Williams expressly stated that the Choctaws were not his constituents: “Now, they have not votes: they are nothing politically to me,” he announced as he began his speech in favor of the enrollment bill. “They are not

my constituents; they are nobody's constituents on the surface of the earth unless they are God's."⁸ Who could doubt the purity of his motives?

Certainly not his *real* constituents, many of whom embraced the Choctaw cause in a show of Christian compassion, but their empathy also translated into federal funds for some desperately poor counties cut over by timber companies and beginning to feel the effects of the boll weevil. The declining rural economy deepened Choctaw poverty, and few white Mississippians thought that their counties or even the state had any responsibility to them. Indians, after all, were supposed to be wards of the federal government, but the federal government assumed no responsibility for the Mississippi Choctaws. In light of this situation, the white citizens of counties in which Choctaws lived clamored for help. In Newton County, where there was a settlement of Choctaws, prominent county officials, including the sheriff and the superintendent of education, and businessmen, wrote letters pleading with Congress for relief funds. Most of the Choctaws' advocates probably had a mixture of motives, but they wanted the federal government to provide for the Choctaws so that they would not have to. Furthermore, any influx of federal funds ultimately would find its way into the pockets of white landowners and merchants. The letter writers *were* constituents, and they intended to exploit Congressman Harrison's known fondness for "pork." Choctaws became their invitation to the barrel.

While practical concerns motivated their supporters, the Choctaws also had political value as symbols of southern identity. In the Congressional debates over the Choctaws the members of the Mississippi delegation, reflecting the sentiments of contemporary Mississippi writers, revealed great admiration for the Indians' devotion to their ancestral lands, particularly their "hunting grounds." In a 1916 speech, Harrison extolled the Choctaws' love of their homelands, asserting that they only signed the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek because Article 14 guaranteed that some of them could remain near "their burial places and their accustomed hunting grounds." Senator Williams sympathized with the Choctaws' desire to remain in their original territory, concluding that the lands on which they lived "are happy hunting grounds even yet, notwithstanding the intrusion of population."⁹ This rhetoric also established the paternalistic nature of the relationship. Ignoring the fact that the Choctaw had been an agricultural people for centuries, Mississippi's elected officials depicted them as hunters and gatherers, a condescending stereotype that emphasized the superiority of their white benefactors.

For their supporters, the Choctaws' cultural identity was very much about race. Choctaws very rarely intermarried with either whites or blacks, and Mississippi politicians wanted to keep it that way. If the United States Office of Indian Affairs assumed responsibility for the Choctaws, it strengthened the color line. References to the "full blood Choctaws" and assertions of Choctaw racial

purity abound in the rhetoric of Mississippi politicians. Senator Williams made this point most explicitly when he criticized the Curtis Act provisions that required the Choctaws to provide documentary evidence of descent from an Article 14 claimant, despite the fact that Choctaws kept no records. Rather than demanding written evidence from illiterate Indians, he argued, the commission should enroll them in the Choctaw Nation on the basis of their Indian “blood.” “Citizenship in an Indian tribe,” he argued, “was never based on territoriality. It was always based on consanguinity.” In his estimation, the degree of a Mississippi Choctaw’s “blood” was plainly visible. Williams asserted that a “sensible [person] knew a white man from a Negro, and knew a Negro from an Indian, and knew an Indian from either of the other two.” Buttressing his concern with racial purity, Williams further asserted that he wanted resources only for the “full bloods” and “half bloods” and for no others.¹⁰ Because they had kept themselves racially pure, “his” Choctaws deserved aid.

Williams’ criticism of the enrollment policy reflected the Mississippi congressional delegation’s general hostility toward the federal government. Harrison asserted that federal officials, having completely bungled the administration of Article 14, were solely responsible for the Indians’ dispossession. Similarly, the incompetence of the federal commission kept the names of over 4,000 full-blood Choctaws off the Oklahoma rolls when they were carrying out the provisions of the Curtis Act. Congressman Quin demanded, “If

the Federal Government itself had an irresponsible agent who caused the ignorant and credulous Choctaw Indians of Mississippi to be imposed upon in 1830, why is it not honest and right for the American Congress in 1916 to rectify the situation?" Senator Vardaman lamented that the Federal Government's neglect had reduced the Choctaws to the status of "simply flotsams and jetsams on the sea of life."¹¹ The Choctaws' situation gave Mississippi politicians an opportunity to denounce the federal government and buttress their own position on states' rights.

In tandem with the condemnation of the Federal government, however, Harrison and Quin also called on the forces of patriotism, which they embraced in the name of white men. In the decade following the Spanish American War, white southerners emotionally reentered the Union. Therefore, southern politicians felt comfortable invoking the Choctaws' history of good relations with the United States as well as the South. Representative Quin proclaimed to the House, "They went out with old Andrew Jackson and waded through mud and blood up to their navals and fought for the American flag, and yet this Congress can not give them justice." Likewise, Harrison contrasted the Choctaws' long-term military assistance to the "white people" against the "barbarous and warlike tribes," such as the Creeks during the War of 1812, who had fought against them.¹² Moreover, Quin reminded Congress, the Choctaws had given the nation the great warrior Pushmataha, who was buried with honors "in yonder Congressional Cemetery" in Washington, D.C.¹³ In this line of reasoning, Pushmataha and his Choctaw

brethren had saved the United States from destruction in its early years by refusing to join in Tecumseh's uprising during the War of 1812.. It was not the citizens of Mississippi who had to repay this debt; rather, the entire nation owed the descendants of these brave warriors.

Following the lead of those who wrote about Choctaw history, Harrison's speeches used Pushmataha to personalize the Choctaw cause. Citing the legend of Pushmataha's divine origins, Harrison called him, "that great Indian Chief and warrior of whom it is said had neither father nor mother, but that on one occasion the lightning flashed and a bolt struck a tall pine tree, and from its splintered trunk sprang Pushmataha." Harrison deferred to the Great Chief in speaking for the Choctaw, proclaiming, "No words of mine could better portray the good and true character of these people" than could Pushmataha's words. Harrison then cited Pushmataha's final speech pleading against removal, which had been given in Washington, D.C. days before his death in 1824, ending with the heart-wrenching words: "I came here when I was a young man—to see my father Jefferson. He told me if we ever got in trouble we must run and tell him. I am come."¹⁴ Harrison concluded his speech with a final appeal to the memory of Pushmataha.

And today, even though Pushmataha has long since gone to the happy hunting ground, his spirit still lives and animates the breasts of the scattered remnant of his race in the land of his nativity, and, methinks, if he were present today he would appeal to his white father in yonder White

House, to his brethren in Oklahoma, to his white friends in this Chamber, and say, 'Give to the Mississippi Choctaws the rights guaranteed to them under the fourteenth article of the treaty of 1830'.¹⁵

Harrison's focus on Pushmataha polished his proposed legislation to the patina of noble tragedy.

Harrison hoped to provoke guilt that would motivate support for his cause, but there is no reason to believe that he was insincere in his historical assessment. Most likely, he genuinely believed that his bill would rectify the sins the nation's forefathers had committed in Indian Removal. For Harrison and the others in the Mississippi delegation, perhaps the plight of the Choctaw also represented catharsis and redemption. While Mississippians rarely accepted responsibility for their role in dispossession, there is a clear sense in the messages of their elected officials that removal was a terrible tragedy requiring reparations, but not from the state.

The Mississippi congressional delegation spent five years urging Congress to provide funds for the Choctaw Indians. Although they failed to get the rolls reopened, they did win a major victory. In 1917 they managed to get a Congressional committee to go to Mississippi to investigate the Choctaws' situation. Their colleagues were appalled by the conditions they found, and in 1918 Congress established the Choctaw agency at Philadelphia, Mississippi. Subsequent appropriations financed the purchase of land, which by the 1950s had

become a reservation and had enabled about half the Choctaws to escape sharecropping. The impact of the federal reservation extended far beyond the Mississippi Choctaws. The United States largely bought worthless cut-over land that owners were delighted to unload and employed at the agency a substantial number of white Mississippians at good wages. Furthermore, services for the Choctaws, Mississippians perhaps believed, signaled the federal government's acceptance of blame for the Choctaws' suffering. And finally, the schools, hospital, and other institutions established exclusively for Choctaws after 1918 made the United States an unintentional sponsor of segregation. Choctaws, therefore, had considerable political value both practically and symbolically in Mississippi's racial politics.

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¹ *Speech of Hon. Pat Harrison of Mississippi in the House of Representatives*, Dec. 12, 1912, 15-17, in the P.J. Hurley Collection, William Bennett Biaaell Memorial Library, University of Oklahoma, Norman.

² Joseph B. Cobb, *Mississippi Scenes, or Sketches of Southern and Western Life and Adventure, Humorous Satirical, and Descriptive, Including the Legend of Black Creek*, (Philadelphia: A. Hart, 1851), 158-59 and 177-78.

³ Colonel J.F. H. Claiborne, *Mississippi as a Province, Territory, and State*, Vol. I (Jackson, Miss: Power and Barksdale, Publishers and Printers, 1880). Reprinted by Louisiana State University Press, 1964, 510, 522

⁴ H.B. Cushman, *History of the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Natchez Indians* (1899; Reissued 1972 by, Russell & Russell, A Division of Atheneum Publishers, Inc.), Dedication; John A. Watkins, "The Choctaws in Mississippi," *The American Antiquarian and Oriental Journal*, 27.2 (March, 1894): 71; A.J. Brown, *A History of Newton County, Mississippi, From 1834 to 1894*. (Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican Books, 1998), 8, 11-13, 221-222; Henry Dawes, Tams Bixby, A.S. McKennon, and T.B. Needles, "Sixth Annual Report of the Commission to the Five Civilized Tribes," in *Annual Reports of the Commission to the Five Civilized Tribes in the Indian Territory to the Secretary of the Interior*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1899), 80.

⁵ H.S. Halbert, "The Indians In Mississippi and Their Schools," in, *Biennial Report of the State Superintendent of Public Education to the Legislature of Mississippi for Scholastic Years 1893-94 and 1894-95*, (Jacksonville, Florida: Lance Printing Company, 1896), 540; Brown, *A History of Newton County*, 9.

⁶ Brown, *A History of Newton County*, 9.

⁷ Claiborne, *Mississippi as a Province*, Chapter Thirty Three; H.S. Halbert, "Courtship and Marriage among the Choctaws of Mississippi", *American Naturalist*, 16.3 (March 1882): 222-224.

⁸ Comments of Senator Williams, *The Congressional Record*, Vol. 53, Part 5, 64th Congress, 1st Sess., 4922-24.

⁹ Comments of Senator Vardaman, *The Congressional Record*, Vol. 53, Part 5, 64th Congress, 2nd Sess., 2121; Comments of Senator Williams, *The Congressional Record*, Vol. 53, Part 5, 64th Congress, 1st Sess., p. 4922.

¹⁰ Comments of Senator Williams, *The Congressional Record*, Vol. 53, Part 5, 64th Congress, 1st Sess., 4923-24 and *The Congressional Record*, 63rd Congress, 2nd Sess., 11016.

¹¹ *Harrison Speech, December, 1912*, 5-7; *Speech of Percy E. Quin of Mississippi in the House of Representatives, January, 1916*, 15-16, typescript in the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson Mississippi; Comments of Senator Vardaman, *The Congressional Record*, 63rd Congress, 2nd Sess., 11013 and 3rd Sess., 5154-5156; *The Congressional Record*, Vol. 53, Part 5, 64th Congress, 1st Sess., 4929 and 2nd Sess., 2122.

¹² *Harrison Speech, December, 1912*, 15-16.

¹³ The Honorable Percy E. Quin, *Speech to the House of Representatives, Feb. 5, 1916, 7-8; Harrison Speech, December, 1912, 15-16.*

¹⁴ *Harrison Speech, December, 1912, 15-17.*

¹⁵ *Harrison Speech, December, 1912, 16.*