

MISSISSIPPI CHOCTAWS' PARTICIPATION DURING THE WAR

Thesis Statement

Why were the Mississippi Choctaw Indians,¹ who were an obscure and irrelevant polity by the time the American Civil War began, noticed by Confederate leaders?

Historical Significance within a Microhistory

Although the Antebellum south established a “biracial caste”² that often disregarded the existence of Native Americans, Confederate authorities conscripted not only its white male citizens but also its Indian male residents. In the second year of the American Civil War when Confederate authorities realized there was a shortage of soldiers, Mississippi governor John J. Pettus decreed that Choctaw Indian men who resided in Mississippi were subject to Confederate law. Even though Mississippi’s establishment disregarded an earlier attempt by a man who wanted to raise an Indian volunteer company, Pettus who was petitioned by white Mississippians eventually drafted the Choctaws into the Provisional Army of the Confederate States. After the Indian soldiers organized into a two-company battalion, they exclusively participated in operations in the Western Theater. The historical significance of the Mississippi Choctaw Indians wartime participation is deeply rooted in their willingness of adopting the American policy of civilization which began generations earlier. The concept of adopting this policy is important because it eventually led to their conscription many years later.

Even though the Southeastern Indian experiences were not as significant as those in the Trans-Mississippi Theater, they were still found within a larger context of the Western Theater. In North Carolina, the Cherokees consolidated into a company within a legion.³ In Florida, the Seminoles grouped into a standalone company.⁴ And in Mississippi, the Choctaws organized into the 1st Choctaw Battalion that was composed of two companies.⁵ But, none of these indigenous ethnic groups were included in any major works of interpretation until recently.

An Emerging Interpretation: The Microhistory of the Mississippi Choctaws in the War

The Mississippi Choctaws were not the focus of study of any major school of thought;⁶ however, the topic may fit in a microhistory interpretation study. In Brandon M. Eldridge’s journal article,

¹ The terms Indian, American Indian, Native American, and Indigenous are used interchangeably to describe the people who were discovered living in the Americas in 1492.

² Marcia Haag and Henry Willis, *Choctaw Language and Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2001), 293.

³ Laurence M. Hauptman, “Confederate Rangers of the Smokies: Wil-Usdi’s Eastern Band of Cherokee.” In *Between Two Fires: American Indians in the Civil War* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 103-122.

⁴ Robert A. Taylor, “Unforgotten Threat: Florida Seminoles in the Civil War,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (January 1991): 311.

⁵ A. J. Brown, *History of Newton County, Mississippi, from 1834-1894* (Jackson, Miss.: Clarion-Ledger, 1894), 96-97.

⁶ For the moral school refer to James Ford Rhodes, *History of the Civil War, 1861-1865* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1917); The Progressive era Beards created a two-volume work on American history with Civil

“The Ever-Evolving Historiography of the American Civil War,” he explains that “new methods and tactics in rethinking ... archival research” can develop a microhistory found within a larger scholarship on a given topic.⁷ During the initiation of the moral school of thought era, prominent Native American historian Annie H. Abel acknowledged in 1910 that the Choctaws were in Mississippi during the Civil War. Yet, the Indians were only worthy of a footnote mention in her journal article.⁸ Many decades later, another brief mention can be found in Laurence M. Hauptman’s *Between Two Fires: American Indians in the Civil War* which was published in 1995.⁹ But, just as with Abel, Hauptman presents only a brief write-up condensed in an introductory paragraph. Since there is a dearth of literature regarding the Mississippi Choctaws during the American Civil War, an extended in-depth study concerning their wartime experiences has potential.

Transmutation of a Culture

Since before European Americans established the thirteen colonies, the Indigenous of the Americas were considered an obstacle and “a throw-back to a darker age.”¹⁰ The highest levels of American governmental leadership of that early period recognized a problematic relationship, so they developed a strategy to help ease the strain between the two cultures.

Their strategy led to a plan that would eventually be called the policy of civilization. The concept of the government’s policy of civilization was to acculturate Native Americans to the European way of living. After the Indians accepted the new lifestyle, then it would be easier for white Americans to integrate Indians into American society. The historian Robert V. Remini shows that the policy of civilization was an important experiment to solve the “Indian problem.” Remini writes that “George Washington formulated a policy to encourage the ‘civilizing’ process, and [Thomas] Jefferson continued it. They presumed that once the Indians adopted the practice of private property, built homes, farmed, educated their children, and embraced Christianity these Native Americans would win acceptance from white Americans.”¹¹ Americans believed that this would lessen conflict with Indian populations and speed-up the inevitable that the Indians were destined to become members of American society or perish. It was a plan that fundamentally undermined the Indians’ culture for a European based one. In the end, this policy would make the taking of “Indian country” a much easier task. However, Remini also shows that “the government’s efforts to convert the Indians into [culture] white men [created] made considerable progress in the

War topics in volume 2. For the economic school of thought start with volume 1 in Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization*, in Two Volumes, vol. 1, *The Agricultural Era* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927); For Frank L. Owsley’s essay on the pro-southern stance theory see Twelve Southerners, “An Irrepressible Conflict,” In *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1930); For an example of the Civil Rights era school of thought see Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (United States of America: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988); For the remembrance school see Nina Silber, “Reunion and Reconciliation, Reviewed and Reconsidered,” *Journal of American History* 103, no. 1 (June 2016): 59-83.

⁷ Brandon M. Eldridge, “The Ever-Evolving Historiography of the American Civil War,” *Graduate Review* 1, no. 1 (2021): 59.

⁸ Annie H. Abel, “The Indians in the Civil War,” *The American Historical Review* 15, no. 2 (January 1910): 288.

⁹ Hauptman, 87.

¹⁰ Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson, Volume 2, The Course of American Freedom, 1822-1832* (New York: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 257.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 257-258.

1820s.”¹² The Cherokees, Creeks, and, to a lesser extent, the Choctaws had some measured success with the policy.

Many decades later when the Civil War was at its height, several Confederate decision makers remarked that they believed the Mississippi Choctaws were civilized enough to partake in the conflict. They stated collectively in a letter to Confederate Secretary of War James A. Seddon that some of Indians found “east of the Mississippi River ... are in a state of civilization.”¹³

Embracement of Christianity

Christianity was a significant component for the policy of civilizing Native Americans in the early part of the 19th century. Additionally, Christianity was important for Mississippian leaders who controlled the state’s governmental institutions in 1860s. When the petitioners addressed Mississippi Governor Pettus, they referred to praying which suggests that the influence of Christianity swayed not only the petitioners but also the governor as well. In the petition, it shows: “Your petitioners hope, therefore pray, your excellency to take the matter under your serious consideration and apply such remedy as may seem to your excellency most [conductive] to the end held in view and as in duty bound your petitioners will ever pray &c.”¹⁴ The document also suggests that Mississippi Choctaws were still subject to Christian influences during the American Civil War era.

Many Choctaws adopted Christianity during the early part of the 19th century, including those who would eventually fight in the war. Jack Amos, whose Choctaw Indian name was *Eahantatubbee* (or “He Who Goes Out and Kills”), was a Confederate veteran and former member of the 1st Choctaw Battalion. Many years after the war, Amos testified in an affidavit that he was a Christian worshipper and was likely so during the conflict.¹⁵

An Obscured and Irrelevant Polity

Even though the obscure Mississippi Choctaws were thought of as an irrelevant political polity, Mississippian leadership still considered conscription as a viable option because the Indians were under the considerable influence of the policy of civilization. The Indians were not a major concern for white Mississippians because the land was under the white establishment’s control, so they were mostly an ignored and forgotten ethnic group by 1860. Katherine M. B. Osburn’s journal article, “Tribal ‘Remnants’ or State Citizens: Mississippi Choctaws in the Post-Removal South,” shows white Mississippians were also uncertain about the Indians status in society which made white leadership hesitant regarding decision making until they were forced to do so. She wrote, “Analysis of Choctaw citizenship in the post-removal South challenges numerous shibboleths of Southern history ... The continued presence of Indigenous peoples following removal forced white

¹² Ibid., 258.

¹³ Alabama Representative and Senators, Letter from Alabama Representatives and Senators to J. A. Seddon, House Representatives, C. S., April 17, 1863, National Archives and Records Administration, S. G. Spann, Microcopy 311, Roll 46, Record Group 109, 1960.

¹⁴ Petition to Mississippi Governor John J. Pettus, n.d., Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Pettus Series 757, Box 945, Folder 9.

¹⁵ [S. G. Spann?], 18th Battalion Confederate Cavalry, 1863, (also known as Spann’s Battalion of Independent Scouts), Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Series 390, Record Group 9, n.d.

supremacists to engage with a population that was neither Black nor white and decide their place in the polity. The ambivalence with which white Southerners addressed Indigenous state citizenship demonstrates a degree of racial fluidity.”¹⁶ Mississippi Choctaws’ status as citizens was “fluid” because Mississippians were “ambivalent” about their societal status. They were not considered white nor were they considered Black. The Mississippi Choctaws’ societal status was unconventional which made them an outlier ethnic group with little recourse to influence decisions on their behalf. So, those in power, white male Mississippians, made decisions for them.

Subjugation to the Powers of the State

In an act of legal precedence, states made the move by insisting “on exercising jurisdiction over Indian lands within their boundaries”¹⁷ when they could not, or would not, remove. This is an important concept when the Mississippi Choctaws need to be conscripted for the war.

After some consideration, the Governor Pettus made the decision to conscript the Mississippi Choctaws. His choice suggests the Indians were still subjugated to the powers of the state even after the state seceded from the Union. Benjamin A. O’Neal, a white Mississippian who was recently discharged from military service, wrote to Pettus concerning the Indians. O’Neal wrote: “I learn that your excellency’s decision is that the Choctaw Indian is subject to the conscript law, those that reside in this state. I consider this a very just decision.”¹⁸ Several Confederate decision makers also remarked that they believed the Mississippi Choctaws were civilized enough to partake in the conflict. They stated collectively in a letter to Confederate Secretary of War James A. Seddon that some of Indians found “east of the Mississippi River ... are in a state of civilization.”¹⁹

Repercussions for Adopting the Policy of Civilization

Many Southern white men, who did not want to be a part of the conflict, were forced to enroll in organizations not of their design. Eligible Mississippi Choctaw men, who were found within the various settlements throughout the state of Mississippi,²⁰ were also forced to join the Confederate military.

During the summer of 1862, after the passage of the Confederate conscription act, Samuel G. Spann combed central Mississippi in search of suitable Mississippi Choctaw Indian men for military service. Spann was acutely aware of the Indians’ reputation as guerilla fighters and understood the value they could bring to the conflict.²¹

¹⁶ Katherine M. B. Osburn, “Tribal ‘Remnants’ or State Citizens: Mississippi Choctaws in the Post-Removal South,” *American Nineteenth Century History* 17, no. 2 (June 2016): 200.

¹⁷ Remini, 258.

¹⁸ R. A. O’Neal, Letter from R. A. O’Neal to Mississippi Governor John J. Pettus, August 11, 1862, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Pettus Series 757, Box 942, Folder 6. Benjamin A. O’Neal wrote this letter than an R. A. O’Neal. An apparent transcription error occurred.

¹⁹ Alabama Representative and Senators, Letter from Alabama Representatives and Senators to J. A. Seddon, House Representatives, C. S., April 17, 1863, National Archives and Records Administration, S. G. Spann, Microcopy 311, Roll 46, Record Group 109, 1960.

²⁰ “Famous Indian Scout,” *Times-Democrat*, May 22, 1903.

²¹ “A Timely Move and a Good One,” *Eastern Clarion*, August 8, 1862.

Spann was unable to raise an Indian company at that time, yet John G. Harrison succeeded. Harrison, who had difficulty with civilians who wanted to prevent the enlistment of Mississippi Choctaws, raised two volunteer Indian companies.²² After the conscription law went in effect, Confederate authorities eventually forced the unwilling Indians to enroll.²³ Harrison's Indian companies appear to have merged with John W. Pierce's forming Indian battalion.

Confederate President Jefferson Davis approved of Pierce's 1st Choctaw Battalion on February 17, 1863. Davis' endorsement on the back of Pierce's letter shows, "If the authority given be sufficient [and] it would seem proper to appoint the officer to whom it was addressed a major as chief of the partisans of whom muster rolls are furnished, and after they have been duly inspected for muster into service ... see that the right to check their company officers be secured in its exercise, and the command be reported for service to [General John C.] Pemberton."²⁴ Within days, the 1st Choctaw Battalion began operations in the 4th District of the Department of Mississippi and East Louisiana.

Exactly a couple of days after the approval of the Indian Battalion, a locomotive engine called the Hercules with passenger cars attached crashed into the Chunky River that is found in central Mississippi.²⁵ The Mississippi Choctaw Indian soldiers were ordered to rescue and recover what they could.²⁶ Nearly one hundred people were in the accident.²⁷ The train crash had substantial coverage in newspapers found throughout the Confederate and United States.²⁸

After the Battle of Ponchatoula (Louisiana) in March of 1863, the Indian battalion was given credit for running the "Yankees back"²⁹ and helping to win the battle. But later, the battalion mutinied and deserted their command likely because they were not paid for service rendered.³⁰ General John Adams then recommended that the battalion be disbanded which it was.³¹ Yet, a few members of the disbanded 1st Choctaw Battalion continued to serve and were eventually captured near Ponchatoula.³² The Indian prisoners were shipped out of New Orleans to Governors Island near New York City where they were displayed as trophies of war.³³ After being imprisoned there

²² Petition to Mississippi Governor John J. Pettus, n.d., Mississippi Department of History & Archives, Pettus Series 757, Box 945, Folder 9.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ J. W. Pierce, Letter from J. W. Pierce to the Secretary of War, Newton Station, Mississippi, February 9, 1863, National Archives and Records Administration, J. W. Pierce, Microcopy 269, Roll 7, Record Group 109, 1959.

²⁵ "Terrible Railroad Accident," *Athens Post*, March 6, 1863.

²⁶ [S. G. Spann?], 18th Battalion Confederate Cavalry.

²⁷ S. G. Spann, "Choctaw Indians as Confederate Soldiers," *Confederate Veteran* 13, no. 12 (December 1905): 560.

²⁸ "The Chunky Bridge Disaster," *Mobile Register and Advertiser*, February 24, 1863; "A Terrible Railroad Accident," *Evening Star*, February 25, 1863; "Miscellaneous Items," *The New-York Times*, March 8, 1863; "Later from the Atlantic Side," *Washington Standard*, March 14, 1863.

²⁹ "The Affair at Ponchatoula," *Mobile Advertiser and Register*, March 29, 1863.

³⁰ J. W. Pierce, Letter from J. W. Pierce to J. R. Waddy, Jackson, Mississippi, March 14, 1863, National Archives and Records Administration, J. W. Pierce, Microcopy 269, Roll 7, Record Group 109, 1959.

³¹ John Adams, Letter from John Adams to Robert W. Memminger, Jackson, Mississippi, April 13, 1863, National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 109.

³² S. G. Spann, "Confederate Choctaws," *Anderson Intelligencer*, March 7, 1900.

³³ *Times-Democrat*, May 22, 1903; Joel B. Nott, Correspondence to William Hoffman, Washington, D. C., June 4, 1863, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series II, Volume V, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1899, 742.

for the entire summer of 1863, they were shipped back to New Orleans where most of them perished and are buried under present-day Canal Street.

Concluding Thoughts

The Mississippi Choctaws' wartime participation was a harshly negative experience that was the result of America's experimental policy of civilization. After George Washington established this policy for Native Americans, they were acculturated in the various industries, education, and religion of the time. After several decades white Mississippians were barely aware of the Indians' presence. By the time of war, the Indians were in a purgatory of sorts, a no-man's land, and a place where they had negligible legal recourse. However, the Indians were perceived enough to be suitable candidates for conscription because of the results of the policy of civilization, and they were perceived enough to be sent to places of conflict, which was not of their design, in the Western Theater of the American Civil War.

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