

SLAVERY, THE PECULIAR INSTITUTION

Slave holders referred to slavery as “the peculiar institution” to differentiate it from other forms of forced labor involving indentured servants or convicts. Indentured servants, mostly Europeans who paid benefactors for their transportation costs to America with several years of labor, were a steady source of manpower until 1700 when fewer migrated. Another, but less dependable source, were convicts serving time for minor crimes that could be leased to private land owners. Southerners argued that slavery was peculiar and less cruel because of the starvation wages and the poverty that accompanied low paid labor. So slavery was regarded as peculiar or more benevolent in the sense that enslaved individuals were given food, clothing and lodging in exchange for their labor.

During the 18th Century, assimilation resulted in mixed blood Indians, the offspring of white traders and frontiersmen who married Indian women. By the beginning of the 19th Century, many had acquired extensive holdings on tribal lands and became slave holders. These mixed bloods remained as members of their tribes and later many rose to leadership roles. The Five Civilized Tribes, labeled “civilized” because they adopted European customs, all included slave holders. The Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Creek tribesmen adopted relationships to their slaves that were similar to non-Indian land owners, but unlike white owners, Indian slaves were often permitted to learn to read, write and attend their own churches. The Seminole Tribe maintained a different relationship with their slaves, usually acquiring fugitives, claiming them as property, then allowing them to live in separate villages, bear arms and cultivate their own farms in exchange for paying rent to their owners. Occasionally, intermarriage was permitted. After removal, this arrangement with Seminole slaves would create dissatisfaction among others and be the basis for an unsuccessful revolt in Indian Territory in 1842. By 1860 the census reflected that about 14 per cent of the total population in Indian Territory were slaves, but the numbers held by each tribe varied as follows: Cherokees, 4,600; Chickasaws, 975; Choctaws, 2,344; Creeks, 1,532 and Seminoles 500.

The Cherokees were assigned land that now comprises Northeastern Oklahoma and while a majority of the tribe were not slave owners, the numbers of slaves held by tribesmen who did varied significantly. Before the war began, Principal Chief John Ross owned more than 50 slaves at Park Hill. His younger brother Lewis settled near Salina and reportedly owned 150. Further north on his Pensacola Ranch, “Greenbriar” Joe Martin acquired over 100. There also were many tribesmen who owned as few as three or four and worked side by side in the fields with them.

Details of life as a slave revealed vastly different situations ranging from the humane, masters who literally treated their slaves as family, compared to others who could only be described as psychopathic. During the 1930s, elderly former slaves were interviewed through a project of the Works Progress Administration *Oklahoma Slave Narratives* and recounted some of their experiences. Sina, a resident of McAlester, remembered her master fondly. “Our old master made all his slaves go to church. He and his wife, Miss Nancy, were the kindest people in the world. They saw that none of their slaves was ever whipped, kept us in plenty of good food and we was always clean.” However, there was the

dark side. Another former slave noted that her aunt tried to fend off her master's sexual advances and told her mistress who advised her "to go ahead and be with him, cause he's gonna kill you if you don't." The aunt bore his children and her master, his wife and the children of both women worked side by side in the fields. Although slave masters frequently fathered children of slaves, they were exempt from responsibility for them. A law had been passed in 1662 stating that any children of an enslaved mother would remain slaves regardless if the father was a freeborn Englishman.

But there was resistance to slavery in Cherokee Territory and just prior to the Civil War the Keetoowah Society, consisting primarily of full blood Cherokees and white missionaries, was formed to support abolition. Its counterpart was the Knights of the Golden Circle, who supported slavery and the Confederacy. By the end of the war, The bitter struggle between these two factions, coupled with the long standing argument over removal from Georgia and numerous battles and skirmishes decimated the Cherokee Nation. The abolition of "the peculiar institution," self destructive arguments between factions, and the determination of the government to open Indian Territory to white settlement, would signal the beginning of the end for the sovereignty long sought by the Cherokee leadership.

