

# 5 Native American Communities Who Owned Enslaved Africans

By Barbara-Shae Jackson

Stories about Black and Native American connections are rarely told within the narrow historical context shared in classrooms, history books and around family tables, but there are some details that reveal a more complete story of enslavement in the Americas.

In the 1830s, the enslavement of Blacks was established in the Indian Territory, the region that would become Oklahoma. By the late 19th century, when over half a million Africans were enslaved in the South, the southern Native American societies of that region had come to include both enslaved Blacks and small numbers of free Black people.

Though the harsh treatment of enslaved Africans largely paled in comparison to that of white slaveholders, Blacks still were treated as an underclass among Native Americans. The Five Civilized Tribes even established slave codes that protected owners' property rights and restricted the rights of Blacks.

Here are the Five Civilized Tribes who held Black people as slaves.



## **Chickasaw**

It is no surprise that the Native Americans knew the land well. Their knowledge became a lucrative business, especially for the Chickasaws who had keen navigation skills. They were hired by white slaveholders to traverse the terrain to capture Blacks who had escaped slavery.

The Chickasaw also held enslaved Africans of their own, and the system they established closely approximated that of white slaveholders on cotton plantations.



## Choctaw

The Choctaw, who sided with the Confederacy during the American Civil War, held Blacks as captives from warfare. When they adopted elements of European culture, such as large farms and plantations, they also incorporated the system of chattel slavery of people of African descent.

Slavery was abolished by the Choctaw Nation in 1865. Per a treaty signed with the U.S. in that same year, the Choctaw were required to admit freedmen – Blacks newly emancipated from slavery – into their tribe.



## **Cherokee**

Cherokee is the largest tribal nation in the United States. They also held more Black slaves than any other Native American community. By 1860, the Cherokee had 4,600 slaves. Those Black people held captive revolted against the Cherokee in 1842.





## **Creek**

The Creek also adopted the enslavement of Black people. Most of the enslaved Africans were owned by wealthy and prominent men, many of whom wielded considerable political power. Black people were forced to work primarily as agricultural laborers, cultivating cotton for their masters' profit and food for consumption.



## **Seminole**

The Seminole held some Black people as slaves; however, a unique relation evolved between them and enslaved Africans who had fled to Florida to escape slavery on white plantations. Many Black people found a comparable form of freedom among the Seminoles and they were allowed a form of sanctuary in exchange for paying an annual tribute of livestock, crops, and military assistance.

In general, the Blacks never wholly adopted Seminole culture and beliefs, nor were they accepted into Seminole society because they were not considered Native American. They typically lived in their own independent communities, elected their own leadership, and could amass wealth in cattle and crops. Black Seminoles were also able to bear arms for self-defense.