

Black History Month spotlight: McCurtain County Choctaw Freedmen

By Doris Burris
Williamson

Choctaw Freedmen
Citizenship Footprints, Inc.
President

Holding several zoom webinars over the past three years, I began talking with a small group of family members about the research I had done. And, sharing the oral stories which had been passed down through many generations which I had collected about our Choctaw Freedmen ancestors that go back as far as the 1830s in Indian Territory (I.T.).

Our stories traveled a path through the decades as they landed in the memories of our family members and repeated many times during our holiday gatherings, dinners, and family reunions. Over the past thirty years of my research with the Burris/ Coleman/Butler / Simpson/Cole family, I have been fortunate to visit and hold many face-to-face interviews with so many elderly descendant members of these Choctaw Freedmen families whose lineages are from the Tom, Chili Flat, Harris, Kullituckalo, and Idabel, Oklahoma area.

Many of these oral stories that were passed on from generation to generation still continue to validate the truth to our history, heritage and existence as enslaved people of the Choctaw Indians. Our genealogical records are proof of how our Choctaw Freedmen ancestors in the 1830s traveled from Mississippi on the "Trail of Tears" with their enslaved Choctaw Indians owners while arriving at their new homeland in New Indian Territory (the Tom area in McCurtain County). Upon their arrival from the 1830s -through today, many of these Choctaw Freedmen people and their descendants became leaders as ministers, midwives, general store owners, interpreters, post office notary public officers in the communities of Tom, Harris, Kullituckalo and Idabel. Through the decades and settlement in these small communities the new Indian Territory where our enslaved ancestors began their new life living with the Choctaw Indians is now transformed and known as Tom, Okla.

While growing up and attending schools as a native

Oklahoman, over the years I had come to discover and realize the missing history and contributions made by the Choctaw Freedmen people. Then I wondered how and why this information was left out of our Oklahoma history books and displays at our Oklahoma museums and exhibits, only to be replaced with proud symbolic images of the Oklahoma Land Run and the new settlers, cowboys, sidebar reminders of Native Indians from the Five Civilized Tribes. This made me realize how these proud symbolic images projected so boldly as they covered up big parts of our history.

However, I knew deep down that our truth still existed and our Choctaw Freedmen ancestors' history and existence began many, many generations ago within the Choctaw Nation and Native Indian Tribes, which one day history will align to reflect its true form. So, this is where my travel begins as I traced my "Choctaw Freedmen Ancestors' Footprints."

John Burris

On our website I shared a story about our family's Great-Grandfather John

Burris (C.F. Roll# 2859) who was born in the 1860s and lived in "the Bottoms" area in the New I.T. (aka Tom, OK). My mother Iola Burris and Aunt Earnestine Burris-McClellon often told us about their Grandfather John Burris and Grandmother Delia Burris. They mentioned how he was a preacher and how he could speak the Choctaw language very well. These stories always recalled how Indians would come to their house mostly late at night and Grandpa John would marry them. His wife Delia -Coleman Burris (C.F. Roll# 2860) played the organ as they recalled watching and listening in during the marriage ceremonies. Marriage ceremonies would take place on the front porch of their house as Grandpa John Burris would speak Choctaw language to unite the couples. Marriage ceremonies often consisted of couples who were Choctaw Indians, mixed blood Indians and Choctaw Freedmen from the surrounding towns/communities of Tom, Harris, Chili Flat and Idabel.

John Burris (b. 1869) CF# 2859 and Delia Coleman-Burris (b. Dec. 8, 1874) CF#2860 married and settled in Tom. John Burris's wife Delia Coleman-Burris had a strong belief in making sure the people in the community

and brothers, even though his father was a landowner and farmer in Tom. Prince says they had a couple of hogs, a cow and share cropped mostly what they grew, which didn't allow them to get too far ahead financially because of what they planted and grew. During harvest season in the fall half of their crops had to be given away to help settle debts at the local general store and other monies owed for other expenses.

Delia Burris

So, they were poor people and never made a lot of money from farming. One day Prince Burris decided he would take up another trade which was building underground cellars for local farmers and people in the area. Prince's mother Delia Burris (C.F. Roll# 2860) also helped out in the family. Delia was a midwife and delivered babies and cared for sick people in the Tom, Harris and Chili Flat communities. After interviewing several of our family elderly members, several of them often say they remember how Delia would often be seen walking down the road during the cold and rain carrying an old black doctor's bag. Her black doctor's bag is where she kept a lot of the things she needed as a midwife while caring for her patients.

During one of my inter-

other surrounding towns who couldn't afford a doctor would visit midwives and a lot of the Choctaw Freedmen people. She described how a lot of these people would come and ask Delia Coleman-Burris and other Choctaw Freedmen midwives about getting medicine for their illnesses. People back then felt confident in the Choctaw Freedmen people and Choctaw Freedmen Midwives because they discovered these people knew about the plants, herbs, and roots because it would help with healing their illnesses. The Choctaw Freedmen people also knew which plants to avoid since some were poisonous.

Some of the first documents I was able to locate during my research showed Delia Coleman-Burris (C.F. #2859) role as a midwife and how she witnessed the delivery and birth for many of the Choctaw Freedmen women including her own family and non-family members in Tom, Harris, Chili Flat and other surrounding communities close by.

Prince Burris

While growing up around my grandfather, the Rev. Prince Burris, he was one of 13 children and was the middle child of Delia and John Burris. I always found him as an optimistic, jovial and uplifting person and also an



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JOHN BURRIS
On our website I shared a story about our family's Great-Grandfather John



Delia Burris donated one acre of land in 1904 for the Pine Ridge Church.

147.
DAILY REPORT.
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,
COMMISSION TO THE FIVE CIVILIZED TRIBES.
IN THE MATTER OF THE ALLOTMENT OF THE LANDS OF THE
CHOCTAWS AND CHICKASAWS.
FREEDMEN.
CHOCTAW NATION.

To the Commission to the Five Civilized Tribes,
Muskogee, Indian Territory.

You are hereby notified that the following described lands in the Choctaw Nation have this day been allotted to Delia J. Burris

Roll	No.	Subdivision	Sec.	Town	Range	Area		Appraised Value		Certif. No.
						Acres	100	Dolls.	Cts.	
2860		1/4 of 16 th of 11 th 7 th N. E. 1/4 Sec. 36 T. 24 N. R. 4 E.				10		32	50	
		CERTIFIED				10		32	50	
		1/4 of 16 th of 11 th 7 th N. E. 1/4 Sec. 36 T. 24 N. R. 4 E.				49		59	25	
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Chairman

JRS

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Flat and Idabel.

John Burris (b. 1869) CF# 2859 and Delia Coleman-Burris (b. Dec. 8, 1874) CF#2860 married and settled in Tom. John Burris's wife Delia Coleman-Burris had a strong belief in making sure the people in the community had a place close by to worship. So, after Delia Coleman-Burris received her land allotment in the Dawes Act, she donated and assigned one acre of land to Pine Ridge Church. John and Delia Burris lived in the Bottoms area in Tom and raised 13 children: Nathan, Will, Thomas, Mack, Duke, Augusta, Hattie, Prince, Lee, Lucy, Clint, Rebecca and one child, Jack Astor, who died as an infant. My grandfather Prince Burris was born in 1907 in Tom and was considered the middle child among his brothers and sisters.

Growing up around my grandfather Prince Burris, I learned a lot about how he and his family lived. Prince stated that he would work on the farm with the rest of his sisters

Delia would often be seen walking down the road during the cold and rain carrying an old black doctor's bag. Her black doctor's bag is where she kept a lot of the things she needed as a midwife while caring for her patients.

During one of my interviews with my first cousin Brenda Droke of Edmond, the daughter of MC and Earnestine-Burris McClellon (both natives of Tom), Brenda says when she was about 9-10 years old she remembers seeing her great-grandmother's Delia Burris old black doctor bag in the bedroom during one of her visits at her great-great grandmother Delia's house in Tom.

I also interviewed Addie Faye Davis, age 87, this year. She was born and raised in Tom. Addie Faye also spoke of how she remembers Delia Coleman-Burris role as the town's midwife. During our interview this year, Addie Faye Davis stated how poor people and white people that lived in Tom, Harris, Chili Flat and

Prince Burris

While growing up around my grandfather, the Rev. Prince Burris, he was one of 13 children and was the middle child of Delia and John Burris. I always found him as an optimistic, jovial and uplifting person and also an ordained Baptist minister. After learning about how he met and married my grandmother Lena Simpson-Burris, it was then when I first discovered that our family had two family cemeteries in Tom. My grandfather Rev. Prince Burris also shared with me in depth details about the death of my mother's (Iola Burris) mother Lena Simpson-Burris and how she and the twin infant child Calvin died after giving birth. Then he went on to tell me about the two family cemeteries in which many of our Choctaw Freedmen Ancestors, including Delia Coleman-Burris's mother (Arey Butler-Coleman - born 1841) is buried. Arey Butler-Coleman's census card shows

(Cont. on page 10)

Choctaw Cultural Center plans first Valentine's dinner experience

Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma

The Choctaw Cultural Center is planning another first, a dinner for couples on Valentine's Day. The Choctaw Cultural Center will host the Chi Hullo Li Dinner, Choctaw for "I love you," on Tuesday, Feb. 14 from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m.

at the center's Champuli Café. The café's staff will be on hand to cook and serve for up to 35 couples.

"It will be an elegant evening with delicious food," said Chef Tanya Nicholas, who noted she will draw from a menu of traditional Native foods. Before becoming chef de cuisine at the Champuli Café in 2022, she was executive sous chef of Roots Café at the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Headquarters for five years. Her earlier experi-

ship at the center, said, "The Chi Hullo Li Dinner is an opportunity to have an exclusive after-hours experience in our world class facility. Our guests for this special evening will have access to our exhibits, a hosted tour, and a specially crafted menu that incorporates Choctaw ingredients."

Attire for the evening is casual chic. Reservations are required and now being taken for the Choctaw Cultural Center's first Chi Hullo Li



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(Cont. from page nine) she was enslaved and owned by Sophia Pitchlynn who was the mother of Principal Chief Peter P. Pitchlynn of the Choctaw Nation.

Prince Burris also described how his wife Lena Simpson-Burris' mother (Della Liggins-Simpson) donated land for one of their families' cemeteries in Tom. From my research Della Simpson-Liggins received this land as part of the Dawes Act for the Choctaw Freedmen land allotment. Della Liggins-Simpson (b. 1876) was married to Lewis Simpson (C.F. #2847) and they lived in Tom. The cemetery donated by

Della-Liggins-Simpson is still used today for people in Tom and other surrounding communities close by.

Research

However, as a genealogist and researcher for 30 years now, I have discovered so much about our Choctaw Freedmen identity as I have followed footprints documents within my research. I often located and discovered things I wanted to know and things I didn't want to know. But, in the end our history is who we are and we must not deny it.

But, I believe family values, supporting your community, history, and culture are very important attributes. Many of these attributes don't show up on historical records and documents located in the archives. But, will be often noticed and seen when researching and interviewing people and the many members of your families in the Tom, Harris, Chili Flat, Idabel, Kullituckalo community. It has allowed me to see so much truth within my ancestors and the many other people who still live in these towns in the SE part of Oklahoma.

However, I do have one concern which is from the many visits and onsite-tours I have made in Tom, Harris, Chili Flat, Idabel area over the past 2-3 years. I realize how a lot of historical landmarks and landscape of our Choctaw Freedmen history is fading away within these towns/communities.

The disappearance of the Choctaw language which was once spoken fluently by our C.F. Ancestors. I have only been able to locate and interview a couple of descendants who still speak and understand the Choctaw language. I sat in and visited with 93-year-old Clara Sue Burris-Johnson last November 2022. She still speaks Choctaw and practices the Choctaw traditions. Cousin Clara Sue says while growing up and attending school in Tom. Just about everyone who lived in her community spoke and understood the Choctaw language. But, now many Choctaw Freedmen and their children from Cousin Clara Sue's generations which once lived in the Tom/Harris/Kullituckalo communities have died off.

So, finding people today in these communities speaking the language and practicing the Choctaw traditions is fading away.

To see my interview with Cousin Clara Sue Johnson visit our website.

So, I feel strongly on why we must continue to educate our people and the public about these communities and the many contributions the Choctaw Freedmen people made to Oklahoma and the Choctaw Nation History. My hope is that one day the historical landscape will bring the Choctaw Freedmen people who lived and coexisted with the Choctaw Indians before and after the "Trail of Tears" from these towns and communities to the forefront and reflect their true existence and identity as we include them in the Oklahoma & Choctaw Indian History Books. That way....Our people's identity will be truly recognized and never forgotten.

I, Doris Burris Williamson, am a native Choctaw Freedmen descendant whose ancestors are (Delia and John Burris C.F. Roll # 2859

& 2860) from Tom. I feel fortunate and proud to have been able to document and interview so many of our Burris/ Coleman/Butler/Simpson/Liggins/Cole family members over the 30 years of my genealogy research. I have traced many members from these families back to the early 1800s where genealogical records show our enslaved ancestors with origins beginning in Mississippi before they traveled on the "Trail of Tears" to arrive at their new homeland in Indian Territory now known as Oklahoma today.

Therefore, I have concluded the Burris-Coleman-Butler-Cole-Simpson-Liggins fami-

ly's survival shows their perseverance, knowledge, wisdom, faith, and family unity which was crucial in helping them survive and come out on the other side.

One of the missions of the Choctaw Freedmen Citizenship Footprints, Inc. 501(3)c organization. It is to preserve the history and heritage of the Choctaw Freedmen ancestors. And work towards helping reclaim our citizenship as native citizens of the Choctaw Nation.

For more information and to support our organization, visit our website: www.choctawfreedmencitizenshipfootprints.com

Nutrition Center Menus

Below are this week's menus for the Idabel and Garvin Nutrition Centers.

Monday - Lunch: beef stew, oven-fried okra, cornbread, sweet potato dessert, milk.

Tuesday - Lunch: black-eyed peas with ham, oven potatoes, tomato relish cornbread, no bake cookies, milk.

Wednesday - Lunch: beef macaroni casserole, Italian blend vegetables, green salad, apple raisin compote, milk.

Thursday - Lunch: chicken and rice casserole, green peas, steamed carrots, tropical fruit, milk.

Friday - Lunch: scrambled eggs, sausage gravy,



Life is Better