

**Pushmataha**  
(c. 1764-December 24, 1824)



# Chief Pushmataha

## *A True American Ally*

### Introduction

Thank you for inviting me to speak today. I admire the Fort Norfolk Chapter, U. S. Daughters of 1812, and your good efforts to honor veterans of the War of 1812. As a member and counselor of the Society of the War of 1812 in the Commonwealth of Virginia, I have attempted to learn more about Virginia's role in the War. Very helpful to me has been the writings of Stuart Butler of Williamsburg, especially his book *Defending the Old Dominion: Virginia and its Militia in the War of 1812*. He would be a good choice as one of your future speakers.

But today I have chosen to speak about a man who contributed to the United States' war efforts in a region far removed from Virginia. Pushmataha lived in the Mississippi Territory (now Alabama and Mississippi) of what was in the early nineteenth century called the Southwest Frontier. A principal chief of the Choctaw Indian Nation, he allied his people with U. S. forces because he believed this was in their future best interests. I hope you find his story an interesting one.

### Warrior

Pushmataha was respected by Native Americans, Europeans, and White Americans for his skill and cunning in both war and diplomacy, and by many historians as the greatest of the Choctaw chiefs (Swanton, 1931, 103). He stood five feet ten inches tall, very erect with a full chest and broad shoulders. He had the seemingly natural presence of a great man, a presence that all seemed to recognize. Gideon Lincecum, an American settler in Mississippi Choctaw country, described him "as possessing the strongest and best balanced intellect of any man I had ever heard speak" (2004, 30).

Nothing is known of Pushmataha's parents or his upbringing. According to Gideon Lincecum's accounts, he regarded this as his private secret about which he never spoke. Even other Choctaws knew nothing of him until he joined a bear-hunting party when he was about nineteen. Whenever asked his identity, he responded only that he came from a hidden land and he was nameless (*hohchifoiksho*). On this hunt he stood out because he made some narrow escapes from wounded bears. He reportedly declared that he would do much greater things in the future. His hunting companions gave him the name *Ishtilauata* (to brag or boast) which they called him until the time he could earn a war name. This occurred somewhat later after his heroics in a war with the Muskogees (or Creeks) whom the Choctaws had fought for years in dispute over the district between the Tombigbee and Warrior Rivers. These enemy tribes fought in a large battle not very distant from where the city of Tuscaloosa now stands. The Choctaws finally prevailed, proving victorious after a charge by a small band of warriors. When the Muskogees gave way, the whole Choctaw force charged as well. The Muskogees fled and many were slain or drowned in the river. The fighting continued on the following day when the Choctaws were again victorious. There were many heroes, but according to Lincecum (2004, 61), all agreed that "the daring and irresistible charges of a certain young warrior, whom no one could tell the name of, or where he came from, had eclipsed them all." After this

he led war parties against the Creeks and other tribes to the West, taking many scalps; his reputation thus grew as a warrior. A genealogy from tribal records translates this new name Pushmataha (or Apushmataha) as “He has won all the honors of his race.”

### **Choctaw Chief**

Because of his superior military and leadership ability he was elected *mingo* (chief) in 1800 of the Six Tribes (*Okla Hannali*). During the latter part of the eighteenth century and first years of the nineteenth, the Choctaw nation was divided among three districts, each with an elected chief. Pushmataha served as chief of the Southern District (Six Towns District primarily in present day Mississippi) for over twenty years until his death in December 1824. Districts were subdivided into *iksas* or kindred clans, each with its own leader. The men were hunters and warriors. Women were successful farmers; they raised one corn crop in family gardens and another in communal fields near their towns.

Approximately two-thirds of their food was raised in the fields (Carson, 1999). The warriors turned to horse raiding (and alcohol) as the deer population declined and American settlements increased. This put pressure on American governments to put an end to the horse raids and to subjugate the Choctaws and other tribes. Federal Indian policy developed so as to achieve two goals: “civilizing” the Indians and acquiring their land (Carson, 1999). Gideon Lincecum, who lived in Choctaw country 1822-1825, made friends with the Choctaws whom he described as “the most truthful, most reliable and best people I have ever dealt with” (Lincecum, 2004, 27).

### **Diplomat**

Pushmataha was an intelligent man (though not formally educated) and became widely known for his wit, logical thinking, and eloquent speaking style. He came to represent his people’s interests in diplomatic meetings, including one with U. S. envoys at Fort Confederation in 1802 and as negotiator of the Treaty of Mount Dexter in 1805. He was known for seeking to be friends with American settlers and diplomats, but he could be contentious and firm in treaty negotiations. Indeed, the Choctaws naturally grew resentful toward the Americans’ almost continual push for land cessions and removal. This was true of the negotiations prior to the Treaty of Doak’s Stand (signed October 18, 1820) in which the Federal Government offered lands west of the Mississippi River (less fertile ones, in the current states of Arkansas and Oklahoma) for Choctaw territories in Mississippi and Alabama. Pushmataha only agreed to sign when the U. S. Government pledged to keep out and evict squatters from the new lands (which history proves it failed to do).

By the 1820s, Chief Pushmataha supported a primordialist faction led by Chief Mushulatubbee that supported missionary education as essential to the Choctaws’ economic prosperity and political survival. According to James Carson (1999), this group opposed any change to divisional autonomy and the power of the chiefs to redistribute prestige goods, retaining older customs (such as matrilineal kinship) to the extent possible when confronted with innovations from American civilization. They preferred removal to Arkansas where the divisional chiefs could continue to exercise their traditional prerogatives. The primordialists were opposed by the cosmopolitans who reached to outside rather than inside sources of power to meet the perceived need to build a more “civilized” unified Choctaw nation by adopting constitutional government, nationalism, and Christianity.

### **Ally of the U. S. in the War of 1812**

Tecumseh visited the Southern nations in 1811 to persuade them to join the Shawnees in war against American settlers. The British supported his efforts by offering arms and supplies to the northern tribes

from Canada and southern tribes from the Gulf Coast. Tecumseh visited the Chickasaws and Choctaws who met with him in a great assembly. He argued that the different tribes should forget their ancient rivalries and combine in a confederation to defeat the White Americans--once and for all. Pushmataha, viewing Tecumseh as a tool of the British, disagreed with his presentation, counter arguing that peace was better than war so the tribes should not violate their treaties with the white settlers. The Choctaw and Chickasaw warriors voted, putting their tomahawks on the red side (war) or the white side (peace) of the fire. The majority voted for peace; Tecumseh was asked to leave and to never return--or he and any Shawnees with him would be scalped. He and Shawnee prophet Sukaboo then spoke to a Creek assembly at Tookabatcha and some of the Alabama and Georgia Creeks took the Red Side with him, being called Red Sticks, whereas others sided with the White Sticks who supported the Americans.

The first significant battle of what became known as the Creek War of 1813-1814 was the Battle of Burnt Corn in southern Alabama near the Florida boundary. Americans ambushed Red Stick warriors returning with arms and goods supplied to them by the British in Pensacola. The undisciplined Americans at first prevailed but stopped to plunder the goods they captured. The Red Sticks returned and defeated the Americans. Settlers around the Tensaw River above Mobile were greatly alarmed and flocked to Fort Mims for safety. About one thousand Red Sticks gathered under the overall command of William Weatherford (Red Eagle) and attacked the fort shortly after noon on August 30, 1813. Fierce fighting lasted through the afternoon but the Creeks prevailed by killing, scalping, and burning men, women, and children alive. 513 of the 553 people (265 soldiers) in the fort were killed in the massacre of Ft. Mims (Summersell, 1957. 136). "Remember Fort Mims" became the rallying cry of the white settlers and calls for aid were issued throughout Mississippi Territory, Georgia, and Tennessee. Washington could send no help due to its preoccupation with the British in the War of 1812.

After the massacre at Ft. Mims, Pushmataha went to St. Stephens (soon to be the first capital of Alabama) to offer to raise warriors to fight alongside American troops. U. S. General Flournoy initially declined this offer, thereby greatly offending Pushmataha. However, Flournoy's staff convinced their general of his error; he then sent a courier with an apology to the chief. Pushmataha raised a unit of 500 warriors, justifying his being commissioned a brigadier general (some sources say Lt. Colonel although Pushmataha in 1824 was buried with the honors of a brigadier general). He obviously relished his rank, reportedly even bringing his wife to St. Stephens so they could promenade along the banks of the Tombigbee River as he observed was the practice of the American senior officers and their wives.

Chief Pushmataha and 150 Choctaws joined with General Claiborne's force of the 3<sup>rd</sup> U. S. Regiment, a battalion of Mississippi militia, and additional volunteers from Mississippi Territory in a march of 110 miles to attack Ecunchate or "The Holy Ground," one of the Red Stick strongholds on the Alabama River. The stronghold was called Holy Ground because the Creek medicine men said that the Great Spirit would let no white man walk there. This proved untrue as Claiborne's soldiers and Pushmataha's Choctaw warriors stormed the Holy Ground on December 23, 1813, defeating the Red Stick Creeks who fled into the canebreak and into the river. Chief Red Eagle (William Weatherford) appeared trapped but escaped by riding his fast gray horse down a great ravine, then leaping (while still mounted) into the river. The bluff from which Red Eagle leaped was at least 10-15 feet high, although some said it was 50-100 feet (Tucker, 1924, 460). Col. Carson's Mississippi Regiment of Mounted Riflemen (including my great-great-grandfather Corporal William McDonald) chased Weatherford to the bluff but could only watch as the brave chief, still on his horse, surfaced and swam to safety on the other side of the river (Whetstone, 2019). This episode is known as "Weatherford's Leap."

Subsequent to this battle, Choctaws began to volunteer in greater numbers from the other two districts of the tribe. After Jackson's great victory at Horseshoe Bend on March 26, 1814, Pushmataha led a large contingent of Choctaws as part of Jackson's sweep of the Creek territories near Pensacola. Choctaws also were a part of Jackson's force that defeated the British regulars under Major General Sir Edward Pakenham at the Battle of New Orleans on January 08, 1815.

## **Orator**

Pushmataha was a great orator, often the designated speaker for his people during treaty negotiations. According to Lincecum (2004), he kept a regular school of oratory that produced other fluent, cogent, and reasoning speakers.

The Choctaws held tribal councils to consider major issues. Lincecum (2004, 94) describes one council assembly he attended where the large number of Indians sat in a shaded arbor that covered a quarter of an acre. They considered whether or not to drive the missionaries from their nation. In the center of the arbor was a small square opening that allowed the sun's rays to reach the ground. Those who chose to address the assembly had to stand in the sunlit space while they spoke. The object of this customary arrangement was to discourage the orators from speaking too long. The shaded audience could remain relatively comfortable longer than the orator could stand and speak in the hot sun. It would be good if today's ministers and politicians could adapt such an approach (perhaps requiring the speaker(s) to stand beneath intense lighting and at some distance from the air-conditioning vents.

## **Mortal Human**

Pushmataha did not adopt the corrupt financial practices so common among other chiefs. He remained relatively poor and had no inclination to friendships with his Choctaw neighbors who sought to accumulate property or wealth. He repaid his debts promptly. He thus demonstrated an abundance of good moral qualities as well as extraordinary abilities, but he also was a serious drunkard. However, his drinking did not affect his business or leadership responsibilities, according to Lincecum (2004, 93).

Pushmataha's last treat negotiation was held in Washington, D. C. in 1824. He led a delegation including the two other regional chiefs and other important Choctaws and several Americans with Choctaw ties. He died while in Washington of the croup (Lincecum, 2004). General Andrew Jackson and other Federal officials gathered at his deathbed. When Jackson asked him to share his last request, Chief Pushmataha replied, "Bury me with the big guns firing over the grave" (Lincecum, 2004, 89). He was buried in the Congressional Cemetery in Washington with all the honors of a brigadier general, including a cannon salute. His recorded last words were:

I am about to die, but you will return to our country. As you go along the paths, you will see the flowers, and hear the birds sing; but Pushmataha will see and hear them no more. When you reach home they will ask you, "Where is Pushmataha?" And you will say to them, "He is no more." They will hear your words as they do the fall of the great oak in the stillness of the midnight woods. (Pack, 2006)

Patriotic Americans should not forget Chief Pushmataha. He was a great leader and a trustworthy ally when needed.

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J. Thomas Whetstone III. was born in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. He is a graduate of Washington & Lee University (B.S.), Massachusetts Institute of Technology (S.M.), Reformed Theological Seminary (M.Div. & Th.M.), and Oxford University, UK (Doctor of Philosophy). A Captain in the U.S. Army Reserves, he worked in the management of two diversified energy corporations, church ministry, and university teaching and administration. An internationally recognized scholar of the application of virtue ethics in business, he continues to write and referee academic papers re leadership, management, business ethics, and American history. A counselor and newsletter editor for the Society of the War of 1812 in the Commonwealth of Virginia, he is also active in the Sons of the Revolution and the Sons of the American Revolution. He serves on the boards of other historical organizations and Pennsylvania Virtual Charter School. His books include *A Southern Pioneer Woman* (2013), *Leadership Ethics & Spirituality* (2013, revised 2019), and *Light for the Dark Side: Ethics Cases for University Administrators* (2019). He resides with his wife Nancy and son James in Chesapeake, Virginia.