

APPEAL

LeFlore property wrapped again in intrigue



Choctaw chief and Delta planter Greenwood LeFlore, who signed the treaty that led to the removal of the Choctaws from Mississippi, became one of Mississippi's wealthiest citizens and a source of continuing controversy.

Mississippi Department of Archives and History

Choctaws buy site; casino foes set to fight

By Reed Branson
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GREENWOOD, Miss. — He is revered by some as the last great chief of the Choctaw Nation east of the Mississippi River, a part-Indian, part-English frontiersman who went on to be one of the Mississippi Delta's most wealthy and powerful planters and politicians.

But Greenwood LeFlore is despised by many others, viewed as a traitor who signed the infamous Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek in 1830, launching the first wave of Indian relocation to Oklahoma known as the Trail of Tears.

Now, nearly two centuries after the Choctaw Nation lost the last of its lands in Mississippi, the successful Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians has purchased the site of Malmalson, LeFlore's grand plantation home a few miles east of here on the Carroll county bluffs overlooking the Delta cotton fields.

The purchase has raised concerns that the Choctaws, who operate Silver Star Casino near Philadelphia, will build one here. Despite assurances to the contrary, area preachers and gambling opponents are already organizing.

In the long run, though, the purchase and plans by Choctaw leaders to create some type of museum could bring the Choctaws, and indeed much of the rest of the state, to some sort of reconciliation with LeFlore, one of the most pivotal yet best studied characters in Mississippi history.

"He typifies the 19th century in this state: a Choctaw chief, a wealthy planter, a politician," said Ken Carleton, an archeologist and historical preservation officer for the 8,800-member Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians.

But the Choctaw Museum on the reservation near Philadelphia barely acknowledges him. LeFlore is not mentioned in the tribe's chronology posted on its Web page. In fact, to find any notable mention of him, one must travel to the LeFlore County Cottonlandia Museum in Greenwood, which has a room dedicated to his mansion.

"The perception [among



Phillip Martin (left), chief of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, and Greenwood lawyer Lee Abraham Jr. have a stake in whatever the tribe decides to do. LeFlore's tombstone is a few hundred yards from the home site.

Choctaws) is pretty much that he's a traitor... he betrayed them and sold out to the government," said Carleton, who disagrees with that assessment. "It's very cool that the tribe now owns the land again. I wish we'd do that with more historic sites."

LeFlore's legacy is undeniable. The city of Greenwood and county of LeFlore carry his name. French Camp, the community on the Natchez Trace between Jackson and Tupelo, was originally his father's trading post. Indeed, the city of Jackson was first called LeFlore's Bluff, for his father's earlier trading post there. (Greenwood LeFlore

changed the family name's spelling. It is also spelled at times Leflore and LaFlore). But there is relatively little scholarship on LeFlore, which is remarkable when one considers that at a time when Mississippi was one of the richest states in the Union, LeFlore was one of the state's wealthiest citizens.

Perhaps that is in part because of LeFlore's death in 1865. Choctaws laid no claim to him. And, despite extensive slave holdings, he opposed Southern secession and his white neighbors in the Confederacy, even insisting he be buried with a Union flag over his coffin.

This much is known: His

father was Louis LeFleur, a French-Canadian who moved from Canada to Mobile in the late 1700s. His mother was Rebecca Cravat, the daughter of a Choctaw princess and niece of one of the tribe's great chiefs.

Greenwood, the fourth of 11 children, grew up near French Camp and in Nashville. He returned to Mississippi as a young adult and, because Choctaws trace lineage through their mothers, was considered by the tribe to be Choctaw. At 24, he succeeded his great-uncle, Chief Pushmataha, to become what some believe to have been the first Choctaw chief elected via popular vote.

He was also an American citizen, and he encouraged Western culture and traditions, including Christianity, among his people. Choctaws were believed to number more than 20,000 at the time.

Choctaws also were being overrun by Western settlements, pressured for their lands and running out of options.

A decade after losing 13 million acres in Mississippi and Alabama to the United States in the Treaty of Doaks Stand, LeFlore and other regional chiefs were summoned in 1830 for more negotiations at the behest of President Andrew Jackson and in the face of the federal Indian Removal Act.

Faced with stark choices, LeFlore and the two other Choctaw chiefs signed the



LeFlore named his grand Carroll County plantation home Malmalson. It burned to the ground in 1942. The Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians in Philadelphia purchased the site and is considering developing a cultural museum.

Choctaws

Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, giving up the tribe's remaining 10.4 million acres in Mississippi and Alabama and initiating the relocation of most of the tribe within three years.

U.S. government didn't uphold treaty

LeFlore defenders note today that LeFlore insisted upon a provision allowing individual Choctaws to remain as Mississippi citizens if they wished. The United States largely ignored that provision.

"Greenwood said if removal occurred, he'd go West. What happened was that after the treaty was signed, the people were really upset," said Carleton. "Eventually, after months of everybody blaming him, he says 'I'll stay here and take the land' (1,000 acres promised to each of the chiefs for signing the treaty). But he was already a fairly wealthy person."

Some Choctaw histories today claim that LeFlore was actually deposed as chief at the signing or that he was working as a double agent on behalf of the government.

"I don't like him too much," said Martha Ferguson, a cultural liaison at the Choctaw Museum in Philadelphia and wife of the tribe historian. "He sold a lot of land that belonged to the Choctaw people. Instead of helping the Choctaw, all he did was get himself rich."

Even Phillip Martin, the democratically elected chief of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians who pushed for this latest purchase, de-

Land lost, land regained

Beginning near the turn of the 19th Century, Choctaws in Mississippi began ceding less productive hunting grounds to the United States and migrating northward. In 1830, at the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, Chief Greenwood LeFlore signed away the last of the tribe's lands, prompting the forced removal of 15,000 or more Choctaws to Oklahoma. Although LeFlore was widely considered a traitor for his actions, the Mississippi band of Choctaw Indians now may be on a course of reconciliation with one of their most historic leaders after buying LeFlore's old plantation homestead near Greenwood.



Source: Mississippi Choctaws in the Nineteenth Century

By Frank Bennett

clined through a spokesman to discuss LeFlore's legacy.

"He doesn't feel he would like to make any comment related to that perspective. It was a very confusing time in history," said Creda Stewart, a spokesman for the tribe.

LeFlore and his family went on to settle in what are now LeFlore and Carroll counties, ultimately building a 15,000-acre cotton plantation. On the bluffs overlooking the plantation, they built Malmaison, a 20,000-square-foot mansion named for Empress Josephine's retreat near Paris.

Historian James Cobb, in his book on the Delta entitled *The Most Southern Place On Earth*, wrote that LeFlore "ordered ten thousand dollars' worth of furniture from France for a single room in his lavish home, replete with Louis XIV furniture and clocks and can-

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delabras inlaid with brass and ebony.

The home stayed with the family until it burned to the ground on March 31, 1942, (it what is believed to have been an accidental fire. "They say you could see the fire for 50 miles," said Lee Abraham, Jr., a businessman and lawyer in Greenwood.

Today, all that remains are a pair of brick cisterns and the

steps leading to the mansion — all hidden in thick grass and woods. Nearby, though, is an overgrown family cemetery and the burial place of Greenwood LeFlore. He is described on his 12-foot-high tombstone as "The Last Great Chief of the Choctaw Indians East of the Mississippi."

Abraham, a LeFlore County native, said he grew up hearing about Malmaison and ultimately decided to explore buying and restoring it about the time Memphian Ann Shook Canale put the old home site and surrounding acres on the market. (It had been leased out for hunting.)

He bought an option to purchase the property and then won an audience with Martin. "He had a picture of Malmaison on his wall," Abraham recalled of that first meeting. Martin visited the site and was

on board, said Abraham, but other tribal leaders still held generations of resentment toward LeFlore.

"What I did was show them the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek and the LeFlore amendment enabling Choctaws to remain," said Abraham. "The problem was the U.S. Government didn't uphold their end of the treaty."

Ultimately, Abraham transferred his option to the Choctaws, and last October they purchased the home site and 800-plus surrounding acres for \$1.7 million.

(Abraham says his interest is, in large measure, historic. But he acknowledged that he will be the project manager for whatever the Choctaws choose to build, and he has the option of purchasing up to 49 percent of any development.)

Under federal law, states that allow legalized gaming must allow Indians the option as well. Silver Star is the state's only land-based casino.

Martin these days is trying to dissuade area residents of the notion that the Choctaws will build a casino on the LeFlore property, suggesting instead that some sort of cultural center, museum or even youth camp could be developed.

"The problem we have is he also said they were doing feasibility studies and looking for a quick return on their investment," said Rev. Archie Goodwin of the North Carrollton Baptist Church, who is heading up a group of citizens opposed to a casino.

"You hear that, and red flags start going up. A museum? We're not located in Jackson or Memphis. We're in a rural area. We are giving him the benefit of the doubt, but we

still going ahead with our organization."

Specifically, the group is watching for any hint that the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, which today owns property in several locations, including West Tennessee near Ripley, and even a manufacturing plant in Mexico, will apply to the U.S. Department of Interior to have Malmaison declared a part of their reservation. It would be the first step in winning approval to build a casino there.

'We have no plans to build a casino'

"There is no master plan or hidden agenda for the property. . . . We have no plans to build a casino," Martin wrote in a recent letter to Carroll County residents seeking their input.

"The demographics, infrastructure, supporting businesses and other economic criteria are not favorable for such a project. . . . The only way that I would do it would be if the people of Carroll County voted for it."

Intentionally or not, Martin also offered a gentle reminder to his new neighbors that the Choctaws are not exactly outsiders.

"As many of you know, all of what is now Carroll County was once home to the Choctaws," he wrote, "and Malmaison was the home of Greenwood LeFlore, a Choctaw chief who played a pivotal role in the tribe's history."

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