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Choctaw leader educated in Nashville by local family

As a young lad, Greenwood Leflore, Choctaw Indian of Mississippi (later Choctaw chief) was brought to Nashville by a Mrs. Donly to live with the Donly family and receive an education.

Can you advise the location of the Donly residence? A photo, if available, would be fantastic. Additionally, in what educational facility was Leflore educated? I believe he married one of the Donly daughters and took up residence in Mississippi. — June C. Pollard, Franklin

The idea that a prosperous Choctaw leader who rose to prominence and great wealth almost 200 years ago was educated in Nashville and married into a Nashville family is probably still news to most Nashvillians.

Very little at all appears to have been written in Tennessee about Greenwood Leflore, the Mississippi slaveholder who once stood up to Nashville's President Andrew Jackson and was a pivotal figure in his tribe's ultimate fate.

More information exists in his native Mississippi and in Oklahoma, where most Choctaws were relocated, thanks to the agreement Leflore signed with the federal government in 1830.

Even the Tennessee State Library and Archives, widely respected for its comprehensive collection, has only a letter from a Kentucky woman in



COURTESY OF RON COLLINS
Choctaw Chief Greenwood Leflore is seen in a portrait hanging in the Cottonlandia Museum, Greenwood, Miss. The artist and date are unknown. Leflore was educated in Nashville before marrying two Nashville sisters. The museum has a room of Leflore family artifacts.

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1945 inquiring about Leflore's connections here.

The key locally is the Irish-origin Donnelly/Donly family. An 1830 obituary from a Nashville newspaper, on microfilm at the state library, described the first Donnelly arrivals in Nashville as coming from Ireland about 1785.

John Donnelly is said by several sources to have had a stagecoach mail route south out of Nashville along the Natchez Trace. He met young Greenwood most probably while visiting the lad's father's "stand," or trading post, along the route in Mississippi.

Donnelly noticed the boy's aptitude and proposed to oversee his education in Nashville. Greenwood's family agreed. His mother was Choctaw, but his father was French, named Lafleur or Lefleau, and said to have settled in Mobile when it was still part of western Florida during French colonial governance.

There is little doubt the Donnelly family brought Greenwood to Nashville about 1812, when he was age 12. His education here lasted about five years. Soon afterward the Donnelly family provided daughters — not one but two, on account of the death of the first — as his wives. Both of them produced descendants.

Donnelly's brother James, who died in 1830 at about age 85, appears to have been an even better known Nashville property investor/trader. James settled here first at "Eaton's Station, near the French Lick Station," his 1830 obituary said. His holdings by 1787 included 274 acres along Richland Creek, west of the city between Bells Bend and what is now Belle Meade.

John's residence also may have been nearby, but that remains unclear. John did sell 10 acres in that same area in 1796, the year of Tennessee's statehood.

Leflore's education here 1812-17 was probably with tutors arranged by the Donnelly family, since formal schooling was not as commonplace in that period.


Photos of the Donnelly home of that time are not likely to exist because it predated commonplace photography by several decades.

Next week: The Choctaw chief confronts President Andrew Jackson. Who wins?

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Write to Learn Nashville, 1100 Broadway, Nashville, Tenn. 37203. E-mail announcements@tennessean.com. Fax (615) 259-8093.

George Zepp writes about the people, places and things that make Nashville unique. Sources: Tennessee State Library and Archives; Nashville Room, Metro Public Library; Internet resources; www.vaiden.net/malmaison.html.



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