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Tribal chief revered by whites, scorned by Choctaw Nation

June C. Pollard's question last week about Choctaw chief Greenwood Leflore's education in Nashville with a local family led to a tale of intrigue about Leflore's complex life.

Here's more about his dealings with the federal government, and particularly his interaction with Nashville's own President Andrew Jackson.

The Choctaw people had their own Trail of Tears from Mississippi to Indian Territory, now Oklahoma. Many blamed Greenwood Leflore, who remained behind, for that injustice.

The Nashville-educated chief signed the 1830 Treaty of Dancing Rabbit with the federal government calling for relocation of his people west of the Mississippi River. But it is doubtful that he could have guessed what would be its true effect on the tribe of 20,000.

Many died on the way west. The ones who made it lived in less than ideal circumstances.

Leflore himself elected to remain in the northern Mississippi area, as other Choctaw also were permitted to do under terms of the agreement. He was allotted land for a plantation and in 1855 built a true Southern mansion east of what is now Greenwood, Miss.

He furnished the house lavishly with imported French antiques and heavy draperies. Some of his estimated 400 slaves helped care for Malmaison, named for the palace where the Empress Josephine of France found solace after her divorce from Napoleon. The landmark remained intact long after Leflore's death, until its destruction in a 1942

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Leflore had married two Nashville sisters of the John Donnelly family, his first and third wives. His first two wives died. He used what he learned between ages 12 and 17 in Nashville — thanks to Donnelly — to ensure his own success.

There was little question that he achieved it. He owned about 15,000 acres in four Mississippi counties and in Texas at the time of his death in 1865.

He "was condemned as a traitor by his tribe. But among white men his prestige grew with his wealth," historian Jonathan Daniels wrote.

He won election to the Mississippi legislature. In its halls he once countered the Latin-interspersed orations of other legislators with his own hourlong speech in Choctaw.

Leflore had been elected in 1822, at age 22, as head of the Choctaw Nation in Mississippi. Sometime before the Choctaw relocation, he traveled to Washington to complain to President Jackson about a questionable government agent who had begun his days with the Choctaws as a religious missionary.

"I, Andrew Jackson, President of the United States, know this man to be an honest gentleman," he was told.

"I, Greenwood Leflore, Chief of the Choctaw Nation, know him to be a damned rascal," he replied.

Jackson backed down and saw that the agent was fired.

Donnelly Cemetery — Alert readers John M. Crow and Jack Zuccarello both cited the Nashville location of the cemetery where some members of the Donnelly family were buried in the 1815-37 period. The "Greer-Donley Cemetery" is off Vaughn's Gap Road near the intersection of Groome Drive. The ravages of time and nature left little of it visible as recently as three years ago.

Related story: Choctaw leader educated in Nashville by local family (8/27/03)

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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: The Devil's Backbone: The Story of the Natchez Trace, Jonathan Daniels, 1962; Chronicles of Oklahoma, December 1927; Nashville Room, Metro Public Library; Internet resources.

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