

HISTORY OF THE ABSENTEE SHAWNEES

The history of the Absentee division of the Shawnee tribe can be traced back to the years just following the Revolutionary War when various groups and bands of Shawnees began to leave their Ohio homeland and drift south and west. The Revolutionary War was important in the history of the Shawnees and many other Indian tribes because it signified the establishment of a new nation, the United States, with a policy of westward expansion and the taking over of Indian lands. Before the Revolution, the British government had checked the expansion of white settlements into the Ohio River region and the region now contained in the states of Kentucky and Tennessee. But after the war the Americans were free to expand as they pleased and they began to pour into the western territories searching for new homes. All the Indian tribes, including the Shawnees, realized that their lands were endangered. The white men were going to cut down the forests, drive away the game, and build houses and towns all up and down the rich river valleys. The Indian way of life in this area was doomed. But nevertheless the Indians did not give up their homeland without a fierce struggle. A number of bloody wars were fought, but finally the combined Indian tribes were defeated by General Anthony Wayne. At the resulting peace treaty of Greenville in 1795, nine Shawnees signed, including the famous Chief Bluejacket.

Some of the Shawnees had already moved away from Ohio before Wayne's victory. But in 1793 a large number of Shawnees accepted the invitation of the Spanish government to settle near present Cape Girardeau, Missouri. This land was on the west side of the Mississippi River, and thus outside the territory of the new United States. After the treaty of Greenville many other Ohio Shawnees moved here. At this time the government of Spain was pursuing a policy of settling emigrant Indian tribes from the United States on its own northern and eastern borders. The purpose of this was to prevent the expansion of the Americans into Spanish territory. Another reason was to enlist the aid of these Indians against the hostile Plains Indians, who often raided the settlements in Texas and Louisiana. Around 1800 some of the Shawnees began to leave the Cape Girardeau area and move toward Texas. Later they were joined by other Shawnees who came west to Texas with the conservative western Cherokees, via Arkansas.

Around 1800 and shortly thereafter Spain was eager to have tribes such as the Shawnees, Kickapoos, Delawares, Cherokees, and others to settle on the north Texas border along the Red River. Some Shawnees may have reached Texas early in the 1800's. A fairly large group of Shawnees went to Texas with the Eastern Cherokees in 1817. These Cherokees had been living on the White River in what is now the state of Arkansas. With them were some Shawnees, Delawares, Kickapoos, and groups from other eastern tribes. The Cherokee leader, Chief Bowles, was also the leader of all these affiliated tribes. The large group of Indians under Chief Bowles moved to Texas in 1817. Soon there was a chain of Indian villages on the Trinity, Neches, Angelina and Sabine Rivers in eastern Texas. In this region these affiliated Indians served as a buffer between the Texas settlers and the wild Indians of the Plains. When Mexico obtained her independence from Spain in 1821, she continued the old policy of settling friendly Indian tribes along the borders. Thus the Shawnees originally came to Texas by permission of the government of Spain, but they remained by permission of the government of Mexico, and later, by permission of the Republic of Texas.