

ROSS, S. W.

DEATH OF CHIEFS.

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Elizabeth Ross,  
Investigator,  
March 17, 1938.

An Interview with Mr. S. W. Ross,  
Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

#### Death of Chiefs

There are old pictures of the Cherokee Capitol at Tahlequah, which show the front of the building draped in black and white mourning emblems. In connection it is recalled that in December of 1891 both the Principal and Assistant Principal Chiefs succumbed to severe illness.

In the election held on the first Monday in August, 1891, Joel B. Mayes, then Principal Chief, was elected to serve a second term of four years. Mr. Mayes was the candidate of the Downing Party. As a candidate for the position of Assistant Principal Chief, the Downing Party had nominated Stephen Tehee, while the National Party candidate was Henry Chambers who had served four years as treasurer of the Cherokee Nation. When the votes were counted Henry Chambers was found to have a majority over Stephen Tehee. So, upon the convening of the National Council on the first Monday in November of 1891, Joel B. Mayes and Henry Chambers were sworn in as Principal

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and assistant principal chiefs, respectively.

It was in December of this year that an epidemic of la grippe prevailed in Tahlequah. Many persons were prostrated by the malady, hitherto unknown, and there were many deaths. Assistant Principal Chief Henry Chambers was soon prostrated. The malady was often complicated with pneumonia, and as Mr. Chambers was 68 years of age his condition, after a rather brief period, became critical. And as Mr. Chambers lay in his room, Principal Chief Mayes, likewise, became afflicted with la grippe. A tall and large man weighing 280 pounds, and 58 years of age, Mr. Mayes was soon in a very serious condition. Both the chiefs received the best medical attention available, but they failed to rally and near the 12th of the month Henry Chambers died, and on the 14th day of the month Joel B. Mayes succumbed. Assistant Principal Chief Chambers died in a house which stood adjacent to the National Hotel, oldest building of its kind in Tahlequah, while Principal Chief Mayes died in a room at the Fuller Hotel. Both buildings were demolished some years ago.

The body of Assistant Principal Chief Chambers was taken to Claremore for interment, the casket being carried overland

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to Fort Gibson on the afternoon of the day of the "second chief's" death.

Funeral services for Principal Chief Mayes were held in the senate chamber in the brick capitol, a large number of officials and citizens being present. Burial was made in the Tahlequah Cemetery where a fine granite monument marks the grave.

Never before in the history of the Cherokee Nation had both the principal and the assistant principal chiefs been removed by death. As a token of respect and mourning the National Council decreed that the front of the capitol bear mourning emblems for a period of thirty days.

As provided by Cherokee law the president of the senate became acting principal chief until a successor to the late principal chief was selected and appointed by joint vote of the senate and council. So Thomas M. Buffington became acting principal chief, from December 14th until the 23rd day of the same month.

In considering a successor to Chief Joel B. Mayes the council decided upon Colonel J. Harris, then occupying the

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position of Cherokee National Treasurer. Mr. Harris, whose full name was Colonel Johnson Harris was confirmed as principal chief on the 23rd day of December, 1891. On the same day the council in joint session selected and confirmed as assistant principal chief, Stephen Tehee.

The assistant principal chief was usually referred to as the second chief upon the death, resignation, removal or inability of the principal chief to fulfill the duties of his office the assistant principal chief succeeded until such time as the national council met and selected a successor to the principal chief.