



## THE HARVARD PROJECT ON AMERICAN INDIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

John F. Kennedy School of Government • Harvard University

### HONORING NATIONS: 2008 HONOREE

#### **The Chickasaw Press Division of History, Research, and Scholarship Chickasaw Nation**

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*Books about Native nations and their people are usually written by outsiders. By contrast, the Chickasaw Nation created the Chickasaw Press to spread home-grown knowledge about their Nation's history and culture. The Press publishes books written by Chickasaw citizens, using the highest standards of professional editing and production. In doing so, it gives new life to an ancient storytelling tradition.*

#### **Stories That Must Be Told**

In the 19th century, the Chickasaw were among those relocated from their homeland by the U.S. government in a forced migration infamously known as the "Trail of Tears." Later, other federal policies aimed at assimilating Indians left the Chickasaw without a reservation territory. Today, many of the Chickasaw Nation's 38,000 citizens live within the Nation's jurisdictional area in south-central Oklahoma, but many others live elsewhere across the U.S. and have little contact with the tribe. As a result, the Nation has struggled to maintain connections with its citizens.

Over the last thirty years, the economic fortunes of the Chickasaw Nation changed dramatically. The success of the Nation's many business ventures — including a bank, multiple casinos, travel plazas, and a fine chocolate factory — made better outreach financially possible but also re-emphasized the tribe's communication problem. Few of the Nation's 10,000 Chickasaw and non-Chickasaw employees knew much about the lifeways or history of the Nation.

No ready solution was at hand. The few existing books about the Chickasaw were not written by Chickasaw people nor did they reflect a tribal perspective. Leading publishers showed limited interest in projects by authors in the community. The Chickasaw Nation wanted to find a better way to share knowledge that would help strengthen the cultural identity of their citizens, make tribal employees aware of the Nation's history, and give non-Native Oklahomans a better understanding of Chickasaw sovereignty.

#### **Not a Typical Publishing House**

The Chickasaw Press was founded in 2006 to help the Nation tell its stories on its own terms. The books published by the Press reflect the experiences and interests of the Nation's citizens. The Press publishes all types of works, including biographies, poetry collections, and essays, to offer readers many avenues into the Chickasaw worldview. The authors touch on spirituality, attempted assimilation during the boarding school era, negative effects of the federal policies, and the success of Chickasaw citizens in many walks of life.

Modeled on major university and mainstream publishing houses, the Nation is determined that the Chickasaw Press not be a vanity publisher, churning out public relations material. Instead, the Press strives to create high-quality works with artistic and literary merit that can compete in the general marketplace. Indeed, Chickasaw books are available through retailers such as Amazon.com and select bookstores in Oklahoma. A distribution agreement with the University of Oklahoma Press gives them added visibility.

Unlike a typical publishing house, the Chickasaw Press is deeply involved in community affairs. Most employees are Chickasaw citizens, and they personally encourage community members to participate in Press activities — as authors and in other ways. In one project, young Chickasaws were hired to interview elders. Beyond learning valuable research skills, the youth strengthened bonds across the generations. The Press also sponsors a series of history classes open to the entire workforce. These popular sessions attract hundreds of people and require the deployment of Chickasaw Lighthorse Police Force officers to direct traffic.

For now, the Chickasaw Press is not a money-making business. The publishing house is funded by the tribal government and operates as a service to Chickasaw citizens as part of the Nation's cultural initiatives. The plan is for the Press to become self-supporting, but profits are not a top priority. In fact, a conscious decision was made to price the books affordably so that as many people as possible can enjoy them.

### **A Shared Sense of Nationhood**

Native nations have kept their distinct cultures strong in spite of efforts to wipe them out. Even so, the need to nurture identity is as crucial as ever. Some Native nations, like the Chickasaw, have widely dispersed populations. In others, it is the norm for citizens to leave their Native lands for college or for work. In still others, tribal citizenship has come to have a narrow, economic interpretation. In every instance, strengthening citizens' ties to their cultures, communities, and one another also strengthens sovereignty and expands the opportunities for self-government.

A Chickasaw Press staff member explains that “although we have experienced incredible governmental and economic revitalization over the last thirty years, we are just beginning a period of cultural resurgence.” The Chickasaw Press is a critical player in these connected processes. By inspiring community members of all ages and educational levels to write about their experiences, the Press builds knowledge about the tribe's past and present. It presents transformative tribal history through Chickasaw eyes and provides academic scholars with an important outlet for work about the Chickasaw. Chickasaw citizens can open the pages of a Chickasaw Press book and see the faces of friends, neighbors, and family. These books — and all the Press's other outreach — are helping create a shared sense of nationhood among the Chickasaw.

The publications are also a valuable resource for the non-Indian neighbors who live nearby and do business with the Chickasaw Nation. Reading books that are written from a Chickasaw perspective helps outsiders revise their misconceptions and gain a better understanding of what sovereignty and nationhood mean to the tribe.

### **Bringing the Lessons Home**

The Chickasaw Press helps citizens communicate what makes them uniquely Chickasaw. In the words of one elder, “It is a way to share and preserve our language, culture, and history with the whole world. Let the people know how the Chickasaw lived and are living today.” The Chickasaw Press gives a voice to the people as survivors and as heirs of a rich and unique tradition.

### **Lessons in Nation Building:**

- A tribal press helps a nation reclaim authority over the way its history is told and the way contemporary events are interpreted.
- Publishing books that highlight a nation's achievements — and those of its citizens — is a powerful way to reinforce cultural identity.
- Self-governance is strengthened when tribal citizens and their non-Native neighbors are informed about the Nation's past and present.