



Open Letter to Chief Batton

June 27, 2022

The Honorable Chief Gary Batton
Principal Chief of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma
1802 Chukka Hina Dr.
Durant Oklahoma 74701

Dear Chief Batton:

Over a year ago, Choctaw Freedmen descendants were inspired by your letter indicating your interest in exploring the possibility of considering citizenship for descendants of people once enslaved in the Choctaw Nation.

Many were impressed by your words and dozens of people responded by reaching out to your office. Some wrote letters directly and others reached out by phone. Others awaited information from those who had established contact with your office. After the release of your letter with the possibility of re-establishing contact with the nation in which our ancestors were citizens, many began the process of securing documentation to illustrate their family ties to the nation.

Since that time, not one single person has received acknowledgement from your office that

letters were received, and to date, no one has had the opportunity to meet with representatives to explore the possibility with you.

Your open letter brought about much optimism when you stated, ***“Today we reach out to the Choctaw Freedmen. We see you. We hear you. We look forward to meaningful conversation regarding our shared past.”***

Unfortunately, to our knowledge, no one from the Choctaw Nation has reached out to Choctaw Freedmen. Several dozen people have sent letters to your office. You have said ***that “we look forward to meaningful conversation regarding our shared past.”*** However, no one has had the opportunity to meet with you or your staff, and no avenue has been established for “meaningful conversations about our shared past” to occur.

At a meeting with you in recent months at a public gathering on the west coast someone asked the question to you about the initiative being launched for Freedmen. The response was simply that not as many letters had been received as had been expected. So, we ask you respectfully, ***does the quantity of letters from Freedmen descendants become the basis for an initiative to begin that will right a wrong?*** If so, this was not mentioned in your letter last year.

In recent weeks when another person from the descendant community had phoned your office to speak with a specific person with whom they had developed a cordial history of exchanges, they were recently told that tribal lawyers had advised them not to engage with the caller.

Again, we ask respectfully, have Choctaw Nation lawyers now advised your staff not to engage with Freedmen descendants?

If you or your staff has been advised to not engage in *“meaningful conversations*, then Freedmen descendants are now prevented from any opportunity for engagement and respectful exchanges between the Choctaw Nation and descendants of Freedmen.

Last year, shortly after your letter was released, the Choctaw-Chickasaw Freedmen Association (CCFA) reached out to your office. However, no acknowledgement was received from the office that our letter was even received.

Of course we understand that there is always a possibility of letters being lost, other groups and several individuals themselves who have also reached out to your office have the same statement to make---that no one has gotten back to them or indicated that their letters were received. It is also known that one group sent a letter to your office with over 200 signatures, yet, none of the signers, can indicate that they have received a response of any kind.

Please note the following:

* Freedmen descendants are not enemies of the Choctaw Nation. Many speak proudly, in their family gatherings of their known ties to the Nation, to the people and to the places that encompass the Choctaw Nation.

*The CCFA has always maintained a tone of respect for you, for your office and for the nation, of which we know that we also have family ties.

*It is known that after the Nation signed the same Reconstruction Treaty with the Chickasaw Nation in 1866, that the freed people had to wait a full 19 years before citizenship was extended to them. Our hope is that we are not beginning another 19-year waiting period for meaningful conversations to occur.

*In the 1800s many of our ancestors died before they would see citizenship in the nation of their birth. In the past year, some Freedmen descendants have died since your open letter of a year ago, while hoping to see citizenship in the nation where their ancestors lived before they passed.

*Your open letter of 2021 brought about much enthusiasm and hope to descendants of the people once enslaved. We ask you, respectfully, will the descendants of a Choctaw people called Freedmen see citizenship, in the nation in which, as you pointed out, have a “*shared history*” with you?

Sir, in response to your open letter, many of *us* in the Freedmen Descendant community reached out to *you*, because we took you at your word. However, our extended hand has been ignored, and it is more than puzzling. Ignoring our extended hand, leaves many descendants with a feeling that what was said a year ago, was perhaps not sincere.

During the past twelve months, there has not been access, nor engagement with your office, nor has there been any explanation of how the initiative that you suggested, was to unfold.

If your Open Letter from last year was *truly* sincere, we reach out to you, once again, extending our hand in good faith and friendship, and express in this letter, our willingness to engage with you. We hope that the “*meaningful conversations*” that you mentioned in your Open Letter, can truly occur. However, Freedmen descendants cannot initiate them without any access to you, or to your office.

Choctaw Freedmen are also a “Chahta Proud” people. The possibility of being considered as citizens in the nation of our grandparents, great grandparents, and in the nation where our forebears were once enslaved, was a long awaited promise that we hope has not been rescinded, or nullified.

When asked about your open letter you were quoted as saying that “it is the right thing to do.” We hope to learn about your initiative to engage with us, because sir, as you said, “it is the right thing to do.”

Respectfully,

Choctaw Freedmen Association

Athena Butler

Terry Ligon

Jerry Moore

Angela Walton-Raji

Sandy Williams