SURVIVING
Chickasaw Fall

"Every allotment, every town lot, every parcel of land sold or transferred from the Nation from west of Duncan and Chickasha to Arkansas; every foot of land south of the Canadian River bears the name of Douglas H. Johnston, as grantor, representing the sovereignty of that soil. That, in itself, is a monument."

—William H. Murray,
in his eulogy to Douglas H. Johnston,
Governor of the Chickasaw Nation, June 29, 1939

The most visible thread running through Chickasaw history from the period before statehood to the decades after statehood, is Governor Douglas H. Johnston. As an elected Chickasaw Governor before statehood, he served six years, and as a federally appointed governor, he served from 1906 until his death in 1939. Governor Johnston had grown up through the prosperous summer of the Chickasaw Nation, experienced the frosty chill of the Dawes era autumn, and braced himself for what promised to be a long winter for his people.

His unmatched tenure in tribal government leadership speaks volumes about the degree of respect Johnston deserved and enjoyed, and the unparalleled diplomacy and efficiency with which he exercised his leadership. "He has had the fewest enemies I ever knew any man to have who held office or was in public life half that length of time," declared William H. "Alfalfa Bill" Murray in his eulogy to Douglas H. Johnston on June 29, 1939, as the Governor's body lay in state in the State Capitol rotunda in Oklahoma City. "Indeed, he had fewer enemies, and yet he was always firm."

▲ THE UNIFORMS OF CHICKASAW VETERANS SHOWN HERE ILLUSTRATE THE FACT THAT CHICKASAW WARRIORS SERVED IN EVERY BRANCH OF THE ARMED FORCES OF THE UNITED STATES AND IN EVERY WAR AND MILITARY CONFLICT FOUGHT BY THIS COUNTRY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY.
◄ THE COLORS AND LONG SHADOWS OF FALL PAINT COLORFUL REFLECTIONS ON THIS POOL IN TRAVERTINE CREEK, JUST BELOW ANTELOPE SPRINGS IN THE CHICKASAW NATIONAL RECREATION AREA.
▼ THIS INSIGNIA IS A RANK OF ARMY FIRST SERGEANT.

▲ THIS PORTRAIT OF DOUGLAS H. JOHNSTON WAS TAKEN DURING HIS FIRST TERM (1898–1900) AS ELECTED GOVERNOR OF THE CHICKASAW NATION.

► THIS WATERWHEEL ON PENNINGTON CREEK, JUST OUTSIDE THE TOWN OF REAGAN, OKLAHOMA, ORIGINALLY BELONGED TO CHICKASAW GOVERNOR WINCHESTER COLBERT.

The previous epigraph, also drawn from Murray's eulogy of Governor Johnston, illustrates the administrative reach of Governor's Johnston's tenure. "Understand that the five civilized tribes were the only Indians in the United States that owned the lands in fee simple [complete ownership]; they were the sovereignty of the soil," Murray said in the funeral speech broadcast statewide that day on WKY Radio.

Every allotment patent had to be signed by the Governors or chiefs in their respective nations. "In the Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations, as they hold their lands in common," Murray said, "they had to be signed by the Governor of the Chickasaws and Principal Chief of the Choctaws. There have been some five or six Principal Chiefs of the Choctaws since Green McCurtain, a great man, was last elected by the Choctaws." Therefore, Governor Johnston was the only person in the allotment years to sign all of the land titles.

Political struggle—political warfare practically—well describes the Chickasaw experience in the 20 years leading up to statehood. The human tendency that would have us simplify history into absolutes would have us presume that everything changed in 1907 when Oklahoma became a state. It would be foolish to understate the damage to Chickasaw society that the dissolution of the tribal courts, legislature and elected executive leadership inflicted. It would be equally foolish to fail to take stock of the forces that were conspiring to make Chickasaw culture and historical identity vanish altogether.

Nevertheless, everything did not change on November 16, 1907. Most Chickasaws were living and working in the same place the day before and the day after the statehood event, having supper with the same folks every night and gathering in the same social spaces. Chickasaws, however, along with all other indigenous Americans, along with Americans of all descriptions, were living in a dynamically changing "modern" world and were dealing with its complexities.

In some limited ways the political infuence of the Chickasaws and other tribes improved with statehood. Michael Lovegrove notes in his biography of Douglas H. Johnston that American Indians had no formal representation or direct voting power in Congress before statehood. In Congressman Charles Carter's words, they were "political orphans." After statehood, with voices such as Chickasaw citizen Carter in Congress, and with other Oklahomans frequently staffing Indian affairs committees and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) positions, Indian interests were in material ways now better represented.

Nonetheless, Chickasaw people had to dig deep for courage enough to contend with other strong adversaries in the decade or two following Oklahoma statehood. Chickasaws suffered losses in the First World War, the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918–1919 and in the deep recession that hit the farm economy in the 1920s. They struggled with these adversities in the midst of sometimes marvelous, sometimes bewildering, new things. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, people saw the invention or first practical uses of cars, airplanes, electricity, radios, movies and one-dollar Kodak "Brownie" cameras. They were exposed to the sinking of the "unsinkable" *Titanic* and the mechanized horror of World War I. Colossal ironies often accompanied the great advances in human thought and science. The advances in knowledge and technique proved tragically ineffectual, for example, when the flu pandemic invaded virtually every community on the globe, killing 20 to 100 million people, mostly previously healthy young adults.