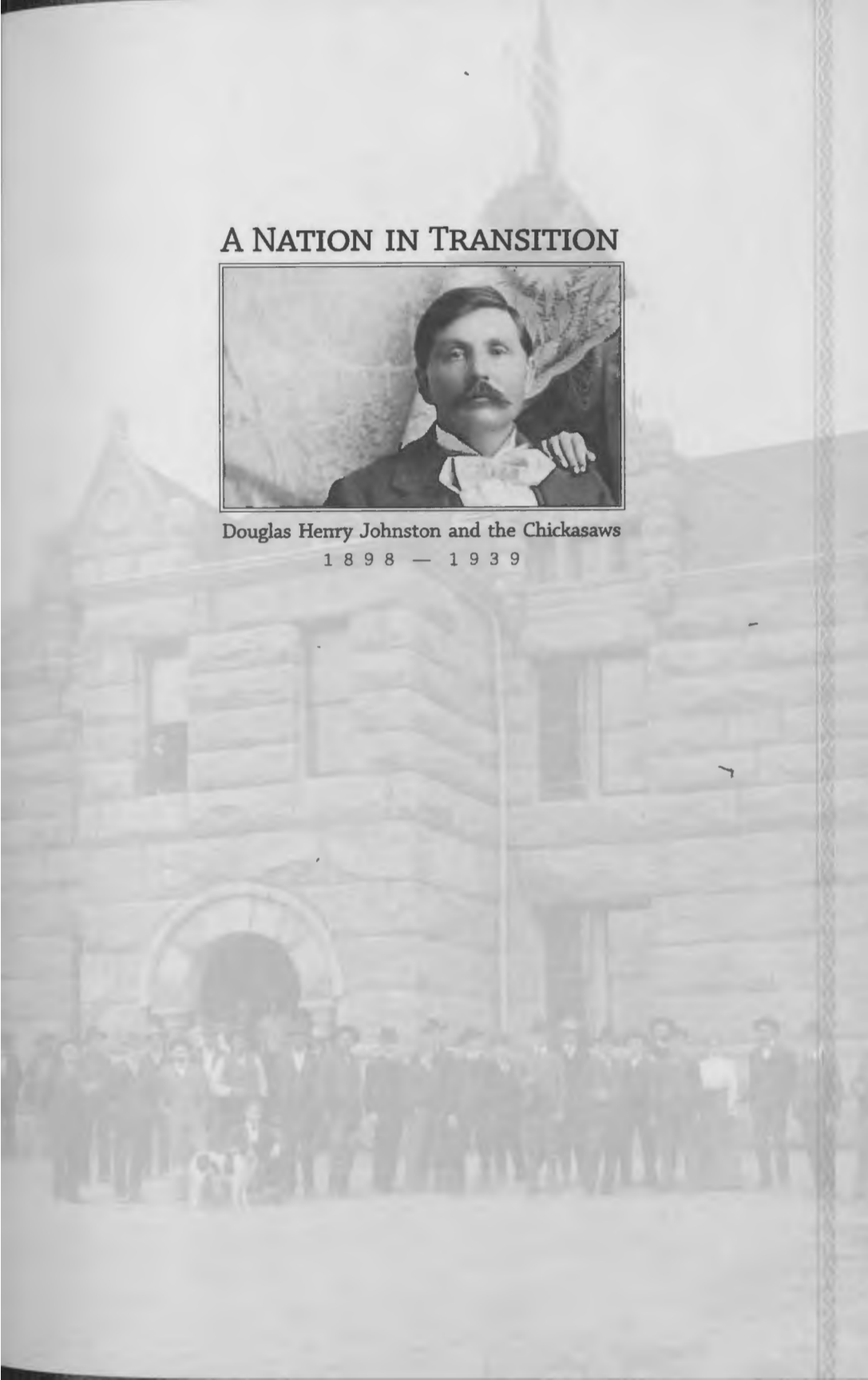


## A NATION IN TRANSITION



Douglas Henry Johnston and the Chickasaws

1898 — 1939



## CHAPTER 1



# FROM SKULLYVILLE TO THE DAWES COMMISSION

**A**s the mourners filed past the coffin, some wept openly while others moved silently paying their last respects. A fatal heart attack on Wednesday, June 28, 1939, had claimed the life of Governor Douglas Henry Johnston of the Chickasaw Nation who presided for some forty years. Johnston seemed to rally from a heart attack he suffered three days before while in Washington lobbying for his constituents, only to succumb. The eighty three-year-old had for many years stood alone as the last Native American chief executive who had been elected by his people. As a show of great respect, Johnston's body lay in state in the Oklahoma State Capitol rotunda. On Friday, June 30, he was moved to the old Chickasaw capital at Tishomingo, where the body lay in state for a second time with an honor guard in place. Oklahoma Governor Leon C. Phillips headed a list of honorary pallbearers, including former Governors William H. Murray and Robert L. Williams. Other dignitaries who served as honorary bearers were Adrian M. Landman, superintendent of the Five Civilized Tribes; William A. Durant representing the Choctaws; George Jones of the Seminoles; and, Alex Moore, representing the Creeks. Johnston had come far from his early days in the Choctaw Nation where he was born near Skullyville on October 13, 1856.<sup>1</sup>

Little is known about Johnston's formative years other than what was written in D. C. Gideon's *Indian Territory* (1901) and Harry F. and E. S.



Governor Douglas Johnston with his son Douglas Jr. in front of their home, the Chickasaw White House, in Emet, Oklahoma.

O'Beirne's *The Indian Territory: Its Chiefs, Legislators And Leading Men* (1892), and other scattered sources. According to the O'Beirnes, Douglas's father was a white man, Colonel John Johnston, Sr., who received the title of "Colonel" while serving as a militiaman during the Great Seminole War. The elder Johnston, a prominent lawyer and land speculator, had immigrated to the Indian Territory from Mississippi. Soon after his arrival in Indian Territory, he married Mary Cheadle Moncrief, with whom he had four sons: William, Franklin, Douglas, and Napoleon.

A slaveholder, John Johnston had opened a large plantation on the Canadian River shortly before the outbreak of the Civil War. A few months after the war began, John moved to Blue, Oklahoma where he soon died. Mary died shortly thereafter. Raised by his half-brother, Tandy C. Walker, young Douglas attended school at Tishomingo and later received some tutoring at Bloomfield Academy, the Chickasaw's most prestigious school located in present-day Bryan County near Achille, Oklahoma. In 1881, Johnston married his first wife, Nellie Bynum, a member of Bloomfield's faculty. She died of consumption in 1886. They had a son, Llewellyn, better known as "Ludie."

Two years before his wife's death, Johnston became Superintendent of Bloomfield, when he was appointed to finish the uncompleted contract of Judge Robert L. Boyd. Johnston was named Contractor of Bloomfield by a nearly unanimous vote of the ultraconservative Progressive Party dominated Chickasaw Legislature, despite the fact his political views leaned more toward the policies of the more liberal National Party.<sup>2</sup>

In 1889, Johnston remarried. His bride was Miss Lorena Elizabeth "Bettie" Harper, the daughter of J. R. Harper, a white man, and Serena Factor Harper, a full-blood Chickasaw. A direct descendent of the venerated Chickasaw leader Tishomingo, Bettie was born in September 1865. Like Douglas, she received her education at Bloomfield and also attended Savoy College in Texas. Her teaching career began in 1884 near Pennington, ten miles northwest of Tishomingo. In 1885, Douglas hired her as an instructor at Bloomfield where she taught for four years. Johnston remained head of Bloomfield until 1897. During his distinguished thirteen-year career at the academy, he established the institution as a model for education and culture, hired the best faculty, and maintained strict academic standards. Until his death in 1939, Johnston relentlessly fought against the federal government for tribal control of the Chickasaw's education system.<sup>3</sup> But the Chickasaws had many issues besides education that comprised their government's agenda.

Long before Douglas Johnston first became governor in 1898, the Chickasaws had been in periodic states of transition and adaptation to federal policies. Since the late 1700s, numerous treaties were made with Indian tribes that were either broken or substantially altered by the United States government. After the Civil War, several bills were introduced in Congress requiring the Five Civilized Tribes—the Chickasaws, Choctaws, Creeks, Cherokees, and Seminoles—to abandon their tribal governments and accept individual allotments of their land. Although these bills failed to become law, Congress never forgot the idea of allotment. In March of 1893, Congress authorized the President to appoint three commissioners to negotiate with the Five Tribes so the allotment process might begin. Not since the removal treaties of the 1830s had the Five Tribes faced such ominous circumstances. Indeed, if Congress and the Dawes Commission had their way, life for these tribes, as they had known it for generations, would cease.<sup>4</sup> Though Johnston did not become chief executive until 1898, and was not part of the early negotiations with the federal government, he believed