



David Harlan and the Founding of Cherokee County By Trish Reeves

Originally aired June 2021

I'm going to tell you a story that is a Kansas story, an American story, and a family story. It begins in the Eastern Cherokee Nation, we might say today, Ringgold, Georgia, in 1804, and ends in 1869 on Shoal Creek in Cherokee County Kansas.

1804 is the birth year of David M. Harlan, the great-grandson of the Cherokee leaders Nan-ye-hi, and Tsu-la. In addition to David's notable Cherokee ancestry, he is also my half second-great-uncle. David's Cherokee father died at the age of 36. Four years later his mother, Hannah Lewis Harlan, married the Agent to the Cherokee, Silas Perry, my third great-grandfather.

Though conjecture on my part, I've had to wonder if David being a step-son of the Indian agent didn't make him quite aware that the truly desperate time, The Trail of Tears, was coming. It's also been written that he and several of his friends were unhappy with tribal leadership, but for whatever reason or reasons, in 1835, David and four friends rode out of Georgia headed for the Cherokee Neutral Lands, a strip 50 miles north to south and 25 miles across, in what we now call Kansas. Harlan settled a few miles east of the present Baxter Springs, his friend John Rogers settled where the town of Lowell now stands, the brothers Richard and John Fields, and Dennis Wolf settled in what became Garden Township. These five young men were the first settlers of Cherokee County Kansas and are credited with organizing the county.

Meanwhile, back in the East, it would be three more years before the Cherokee tribe had lost two court cases in their attempt to prevent their removal from their homes, and General Winfield Scott and 7,000 soldiers were sent to force the tribal members into stockades while their homes were looted just prior to them being forced onto the 1,200 mile march.

To compound that tragedy, back at what we Kansans now think of as home, and 30 years after the 5 young men left Georgia, the United States Government decreed that all Cherokees had lost their legal claims to remain on the Neutral Lands, the territory these once-young men had settled. This was now 1868; David Harlan died one year later. As his daughter-in-law recounted, "When it was found that the Cherokees could not hold the land in what is now southern Kansas we sold our place and located south of here." What had once been David's new home in the West was described in 1869 as "320 acres of land situated on Shoal Creek in Cherokee County Kansas and known as D. M. Harlan Head rights reservation as a Cherokee Indian."

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