

This Day in History... September 16, 1893

Largest Land Run in Oklahoma

On September 16, 1893, some 100,000 people raced to claim 6 million acres of land in former Indian Territory in Oklahoma. It was the largest land run in Oklahoma and resulted in the establishment of 40,000 homesteads.

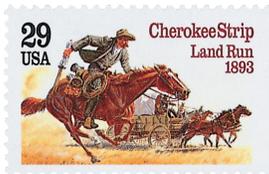
Arapaho, Caddo, Cheyenne, Comanche, Kiowa, Osage, Pawnee, and Wichita Indians lived in the Oklahoma region before Europeans came to the area. These people followed the gigantic herds of buffalo that roamed the grasslands.

Spanish explorers were the first Europeans to reach Oklahoma. In 1541, Francisco Vázquez de Coronado commanded an expedition that traveled from Tiguex, New Mexico, to present-day Oklahoma. Another Spaniard, Hernando de Soto, may have reached the area. Both expeditions were searching for gold; neither was successful.

In 1682, René-Robert Cavelier, a French explorer, traveled down the Mississippi River. Although he did not enter Oklahoma, he claimed all the land drained by the Mississippi for France. This territory was called Louisiana, and included Oklahoma. This led to many explorers, fur traders, and trappers coming to Oklahoma.

France claimed Louisiana until 1762, when it was sold to Spain. Napoleon regained Louisiana in 1800, and then sold this massive parcel of land to the United States in 1803 as part of the Louisiana Purchase. Oklahoma then became part of the US.

The Louisiana Territory consisted of 827,987 square miles of land. Congress divided the territory for administrative purposes. The territory was reorganized several times. At first, Oklahoma was part of the District of Louisiana. In 1805, it became part of the Louisiana Territory. In 1812, the Missouri Territory was organized from the Louisiana Territory. Then, in 1819, the US settled a boundary dispute with Spain. As part of the settlement, the Oklahoma panhandle was given to Spain. That same year, sections of Oklahoma became part of the Arkansas Territory.



Pictures people on horseback and in a wagon racing to stake their claims.

For more than a hundred years, the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole Indians had lived in close proximity to Europeans in the southeastern US. These people had adopted a great deal of European culture and were known as the "Five Civilized Tribes." In 1819, the US government began pressuring the Five Civilized Tribes to move west to Oklahoma. At that time, Oklahoma was mostly unpopulated. The government built Fort Towson and Fort Gibson, and forced the Five Tribes to move there. From 1830-1842, the Indians made the trip to eastern Oklahoma. Thousands of Indians died along the way. The journey came to be known as the Trail of Tears.

The Five Civilized Tribes were given control of all of Oklahoma except the Panhandle. Treaties stated the Indians would own the lands "as long as grass shall grow and rivers run." Each tribe developed its own legislature, courts, laws, and capital. Farms and ranches were established, and churches and schools were built. Treaties protected the tribes from white settlement – until the Civil War.

The Five Civilized Tribes owned slaves. Originally from the South, they were invited to join the Confederacy. In 1861, some of the Indians entered into a treaty of alliance with the Confederacy. The leader of the Cherokee Indians, Chief John Ross, formed a brigade of Indians to fight for the South. Stand Watie, a Cherokee leader, became a brigadier general in the Confederate Army. A small number of Indians chose to fight for the Union. After the Civil War, the US government forced the Indians to relinquish their lands in the West as a punishment for supporting the Confederacy.

The land bordering the Indian Territory was quickly filled with white settlers. White cattle ranchers began driving their herds across these fertile lands as they traveled from Texas to rail centers in Kansas. Over 6 million longhorn cattle crossed the Indian land between 1866 and 1885. Cattlemen leased more than 6 million acres of Indian land for five years, but these leases were declared illegal.

By the late 1800s, "boomers" (whites who wanted Indian land opened for settlement), had pressured the government and president Benjamin Harrison to change their policy. Their first victory came in 1889, when they convinced the government to open up public lands in Oklahoma for settlement. At noon on April 22, 1889, the first of several land runs into Oklahoma was held, offering up 2 million acres for settlement. Settlers amassed at the border, ready to seize prime land. With a pistol shot, they raced into the land. By evening, 50,000 white families had moved to Oklahoma. In the course of a single day, Guthrie and Oklahoma City had become cities with populations over 10,000.

The following year, president Harrison issued a proclamation outlawing grazing leases in the Cherokee Territory. As a result, the Cherokee agreed to sell their lands, about three million acres, to the government.



Oklahoma centennial stamp picturing sunrise on the Cimarron River and a line from the musical, Oklahoma.

Congress established the Oklahoma Territory in May 1890. Guthrie served as the capital, and the panhandle was added to the territory. (The panhandle had become US territory when Texas joined the Union.) Over time, the Indians were forced to accept individual allotment of their lands. This meant individuals held land titles, rather than tribes. Land not allotted to Indians was opened for settlement by whites. Several more land runs were held in the coming years, but the largest came in 1893.

In the days and weeks leading up to the scheduled land run, thousands flocked to Kansas' nearby boomer camps. Living in tents, they were anxious to secure their plot of land. Oklahoma's fourth and largest land run began at noon on September 16, 1893 when the Cherokee Outlet and the Tonkawa and Pawnee reservations were opened for settlement. Land offices were set up in four locations with infantry troops present to maintain order among the frenzied settlers. In spite of the military presence, a large number of "sooners" ran ahead and staked their claims before the noon start time. They got some of the best plots in the eastern third of the territory.

On the very first day, 100,000 people claimed 6 million acres of land and 40,000 homesteads in what the New York Times had billed as the "greatest real estate deal of the century." With the number of people far outnumbering the space available, many families failed to secure a claim. Additionally, some of those that secured land were unable to successfully farm it and abandoned their plots by the end of the year.



Issued for the 75th anniversary of the Cherokee land run.



Issued for the 100th anniversary of the Five Civilized Tribes in Oklahoma.

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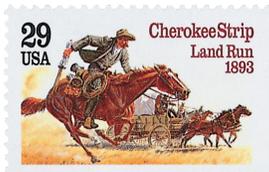
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More land runs followed and in 1907, and the Cherokee and white settlers worked together to attain statehood.

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