

Key Vocabulary

Sequoyah Movement

poll tax

Enabling Act

Oklahoma Constitutional Convention

Progressivism

Populism

initiative

referendum

Senate Bill One

Guinn v. United States

disenfranchisement

Learning Outcomes:

The learner will be able to...

- Identify how the Sequoyah Movement reflected the Indigenous resistance to statehood.
- Explain how the ideals of the national Progressive movement are reflected in the Oklahoma Constitution and government.
- Explain the impact of the Enabling Act on statehood.
- Describe the impact that statehood had on tribal sovereignty and governments.
- Describe specific Oklahoma constitutional provisions such as direct primary, initiative, referendum, and recall.

Compelling Question:

- What was gained and what was lost when Indian Territory became the state of Oklahoma?

Chapter Overview

Oklahoma became the 46th state in the US in 1907. In this chapter, learners will trace the events that led to statehood. The milestone was an achievement for some but a setback for others. The legal transition from Indian Territory to the state of Oklahoma was deeply contested by tribal governments and Black Oklahomans, who continued to fight for their sovereignty and human rights in the face of mounting pressure for statehood. The events leading to statehood took place during the national Progressive Movement, fueled by widespread support for social activism and political reform in the areas of labor rights, voting rights, and education. The Oklahoma Constitution contained many reformist principles that gave citizens a larger voice in state government than people had in other states.

Men. Women. Republicans. Democrats. Populists. Progressives. Native Americans. Blacks. Whites. Immigrants. Speculators. Rich. Poor. Farmers. Sharecroppers. Entrepreneurs. Missionaries. The adventurous and the afraid. The swindlers and the well-intentioned. All these people looked to Oklahoma as a place they could remake and refashion into a land where they could thrive. Their vision would shape what Oklahoma would become. Many saw it as a place where opportunity was alive and well. However, opportunity for one came at an expense to others, and so it is important to understand that from the beginning, the statehood process—that is, the making of Oklahoma into a US state—proved equally contentious and optimistic, because some people benefited from the outcome and some did not.

Before Oklahoma became a state, though, much remained unclear. Would the twin territories of Indian Territory and Oklahoma Territory become one or two states? Surely, the twin territories could just as easily become twin states. Or that is what many involved in the statehood process hoped would happen.



Fig. 6.1: The curriculum at the Cherokee Female Seminary, a boarding school operated by the Cherokee Nation in Tahlequah, was based on the academic method of study at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in Massachusetts. Students of the Cherokee Female Seminary, seen here in 1902, with the school building in the background, often attended eastern colleges with expectations of returning to their nation to serve in leadership roles. Jennie Ross Cobb, a graduate of the seminary and great-granddaughter of Chief John Ross, took this photograph with her box camera.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Competing Ideas for Statehood

The history of the division and expansion of Oklahoma land is complex. It is helpful to keep in mind that prior to 1890, present-day Oklahoma was part of Indian Territory.



Map 6.1: Oklahoma Territory and Indian Territory. By 1890 the western portion of Indian Territory became known as Oklahoma Territory. Together, the two areas became known as the “Twin Territories.”

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In 1890, the region was split into Indian Territory (much of the eastern half of present-day Oklahoma), where the Five Tribes and other Indigenous nations lived, and Oklahoma Territory, where Indigenous nations (mostly Plains tribes) and a growing number of settlers lived. As discussed in the last chapter, much of the land in Oklahoma Territory was opened for new settlement through land runs and land lotteries, following the further dispossession of Indigenous land.

As the population increased in both Oklahoma Territory and Indian Territory, a lot of ideas and plans emerged about statehood, including the possibility of the twin territories becoming two states.

How Territories Become States

In the United States, the process of a territory becoming a state is lengthy. A territory is an area of land bought or claimed by the US government. Statehood makes it a recognized part of organized land that the government oversees. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 set out the process for a territory to join the Union as a state. At the time the ordinance addressed the Northwest Territory, which was located northwest of the Ohio River. In the ordinance, Congress laid out plans for how the territory could start its process for statehood and the steps it would follow. The territory had to form a government. This government would begin to maintain control. It also would start a relationship with the US government. The territory had to have a body of government appointed by Congress and had to be led by a governor, a secretary, and judges who lived there.

The territory needed more than 60,000 people to become a state. People living in these territories tried to get more people to move to them. They offered them opportunities. New people bought plots of land. Later, the Homestead Act of 1862 allowed those who could not afford to purchase land to become landowners after working the land for five years. In some cases, the territory would need to have a government. This was to manage economic growth. It was also to meet the needs of the population.

The 1797 ordinance established a government in the Northwest Territory. It also laid out the process of achieving statehood for other territories. Over time, territories split and became many states. The Northwest Territory became Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Michigan. In other cases, territories like Indian Territory and Oklahoma Territory merged to become a state.

The idea of Oklahoma, or even two states, held great promise in many people's minds. In order to understand that promise and the hope it created, it is important to consider the different plans for statehood and what Oklahoma meant to different groups of people. For example, E. P. McCabe saw an opportunity. He believed Oklahoma could offer African Americans a true "promised land." He worked tirelessly to convince others to support the plan for Oklahoma Territory to become an all-Black state where African Americans could realize full equality. African Americans from all over the country heard about the opportunities in Oklahoma. Some people traveled a great distance to settle in one of Oklahoma's many All-Black towns or thriving Black communities in Tulsa and Oklahoma City. Indigenous Nations meanwhile faced unrelenting efforts to undermine their sovereignty and land rights, especially after the Reconstruction treaties took more land and weakened tribal governments.

Then came the idea of an all-Indian state of Sequoyah.



Fig. 6.2: The "City of Muskogee" steamboat on the Arkansas River around 1906. With the establishment of Fort Gibson on the Arkansas River and Fort Towson on the Red River in 1824, steamboats delivered supplies and people to Indian Territory and later Oklahoma. Major exports included cotton and hides. Steamboat landings were places where a steamboat could pull up and lay a plank connecting it to the shore. Landings on the Arkansas River included Fort Coffee, Skullyville, Sallisaw, Webbers Falls, and Fort Gibson. When railroads expanded in the late 1800s, steamboat transportation began to decline.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

If Indian Territory became an all-Indian US state, then tribal power within that state would be recognized and protected. Perhaps this was the solution that would finally give lasting protection to Indigenous land and sovereignty. Republicans had dominated territorial government in Oklahoma. With the influx of more Democrats from the South and the unwillingness of many Republicans to reject calls for segregation, however, Democrats might just have a chance to take control of Oklahoma politics.

Chief Pleasant Porter was supposed to oversee the dismantling of the Muscogee (Creek) government under the Curtis Act. He quickly gave his support to the Sequoyah Movement in an effort to save tribal sovereignty and prevent a full dismantling of tribal governments. Chief Porter understood that much of Congress as well as President Theodore Roosevelt opposed having separate states, but he hoped that tribal representatives could persuade these US leaders to change their minds.

Some influential white citizens, however, saw the Sequoyah Movement quite differently. They viewed it as an effort by Native Americans to deprive white people living in Indian Territory of their rights as citizens. They described the movement as undemocratic, claiming it would allow a small minority to control the rights of the still increasing majority of white occupants in Indian Territory. For example, a powerful railroad attorney named Samuel Thomas ("S. T.") Bledsoe opposed the creation of the State of Sequoyah, saying it would be "controlled and dominated by the red man to the practical exclusion of his Anglo-Saxon brother." While this was never the intent or the likely outcome of the State of Sequoyah, Bledsoe's claim echoed the opinions of other opponents of the movement.

Map 6.2: Map of the proposed State of Sequoyah. In fall 1905 the Sequoyah Convention was held in Muskogee to draft a constitution for a proposed all-Indian state, made up of the Five Tribes. This 1905 map shows county designations. Convention attendees included Principal Chief Pleasant Porter (Muscogee Creek); Charles Haskell, Oklahoma's first governor; and Robert L. Owen, one of Oklahoma's first senators, when Oklahoma became a state two years later in 1907.

Despite the efforts of Bledsoe and others to tout the Sequoyah Movement as unfair to whites, it is noteworthy that it had the support of numerous white leaders with political ambitions of their own. In fact, some non-Indigenous participants at the time as well as later scholars who wrote about the subject have downplayed the role of Indigenous leaders in the Sequoyah Movement. Instead, they have argued that Indian representation was only for appearances and that the real power behind the effort came from whites. It is important to understand how multiple groups saw this effort and to remember that regardless of how some chose to characterize it, for Indigenous leaders like Norman and Porter, the Sequoyah Movement was about protecting tribal sovereignty.



Fig. 6.3: The cotton market in downtown Stroud, Oklahoma Territory, 1906. By 1907 almost all of Oklahoma's seventy-five counties produced cotton. The top cotton-producing counties were Greer, Jackson and Caddo Counties in the southwest, and Lincoln and Pottawatomie Counties in central Oklahoma.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Key support for the Sequoyah Convention (also called the Muskogee Convention) came from Democratic politicians (and future governors) Charles N. Haskell and William "Alfalfa Bill" Murray. Neither of these men really believed that an independent state of Sequoyah was likely. They saw the convention as an opportunity to increase their power and visibility in what would become the single state of Oklahoma. The Sequoyah Convention provided a way for Democrats such as Haskell and Murray to come together in hopes of chipping away at the Republican hold on Oklahoma Territory politics.

Section 1

The Making of a State

UNIT 2

It took less than three weeks for the Sequoyah Convention to draft a constitution and ready it for a vote on November 7, 1905. Murray toured Indian Territory trying to increase support ahead of the election. He argued that the convention in Muskogee had representation from all races in the territory and called on “every farmer, every laborer, every merchant, and every professional man—every man, be he red, white, or black—to cast his ballot” in support of the constitution. While there was some truth to Murray’s claim that the Sequoyah convention promoted democratic or equal representation, his motive was more than a little self-serving and he neglected to point out any of the numerous undemocratic elements of the constitution drafted by the delegates at the convention. Women’s suffrage, or the right of women to vote, was discussed, but not included. A provision requiring married women to get their husband’s permission to sell their property was included. A **poll tax** was added, which would make it hard for poor men to vote as it would require them to pay a fee before voting. An “open shop” clause was also included, meaning that workers could not be required to join labor unions, which many viewed as vital to protecting worker’s rights. Delegates to the convention also decided to go ahead and “pick” among themselves who would serve as US representatives in Congress and even hoped to install Murray and Haskell as the two US senators.

Making the State of Oklahoma

Despite the enthusiasm of some in Indian Territory for the State of Sequoyah, the possibility of separate Indian statehood was not seriously considered at the national level. Neither the US House of Representatives nor the Senate showed much interest in Sequoyah. Most agreed with President Theodore Roosevelt’s support for a single state of Oklahoma. After both houses of Congress chose not to consider the proposal for the state of Sequoyah, the effort fizzled. On June 16, 1906, President Roosevelt signed the **Enabling Act**, which started the process of merging Oklahoma Territory and Indian Territory into the single state of Oklahoma. The act called for the election of delegates for a constitutional convention. Once delegates were in place, a new constitution would be written. Of course, there was already a draft constitution from the Sequoyah Convention and there were experienced leaders from that movement, like Haskell and Murray, who eagerly awaited the opportunity to influence the new constitutional convention.

Prior to the constitutional convention, the appointment of governors and various territorial officials fell to the president of the United States, which generally meant that the party of the president was the party in control of a territory. That is the main reason why Republicans had dominated territorial politics in what became Oklahoma. Several factors now set the stage for this to change. There was a growing number of whites from the South moving to Oklahoma, and they were much more likely to be Democrats than Republicans. As a result, many Blacks in Oklahoma who identified as Republicans found themselves both outnumbered and increasingly at odds with the party over the issue of segregation. The strong influence of certain Democrats, like Murray and Haskell at the Sequoyah Convention, also strengthened the power of Democrats. Finally, the simple fact that a vast majority of the delegates elected to participate in the new convention were Democrats foreshadowed the likelihood of a Democratic-controlled state. Each territory elected 55 delegates, and the Osage Nation elected 2. Of the 112 total delegates at the **Oklahoma Constitutional Convention** in 1906, only 12 were Republicans. Democratic leader Bill Murray presided over the event.

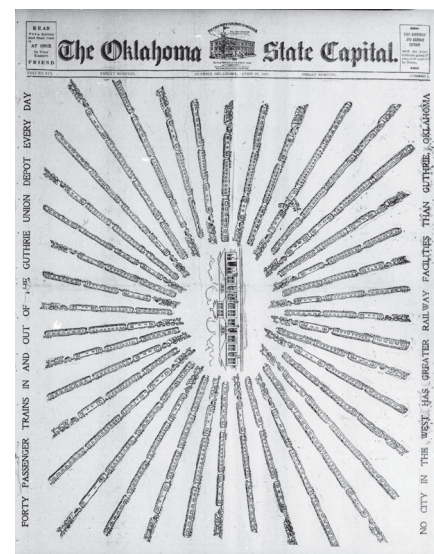


Fig. 6.4: The front page of Guthrie’s *Oklahoma State Capitol* newspaper, April 22, 1904. “Forty passenger trains in and out of the Guthrie Union Depot every day,” it boasts. To research this and other newspapers, visit The Gateway to Oklahoma History, gateway.okhistory.org.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Progressivism

The discussions at the Oklahoma Constitutional Convention—and the compromises and decisions that emerged—were heavily influenced by the national movement of **Progressivism**. Progressive ideas and concerns (including conflicting views and notions about the process of government) shaped the new constitution. Progressivism emerged nationally at the end of the nineteenth century and dominated the first two decades of the twentieth century. Progressives did not all share the same set of beliefs. Some were Republicans and some were Democrats. Others were Socialists. Some wanted women to have the right to vote and for voters to directly elect US Senators (rather than state legislators selecting them). Some were focused on protecting the rights of workers, including the right to form labor unions, and on making working conditions safer. Others focused on fair competition among businesses or making sure food and medications were safe for consumers. These are just a few examples of the range of issues Progressives addressed in the early twentieth century as Oklahoma moved toward statehood.

While Progressives did not all want the same thing or even have the same political affiliation, they did have something important in common. And this is what led to them being called “Progressives.” They believed that progress and improvement were possible through passing new laws. The phrase “investigate, educate, legislate” is a helpful way of thinking about the process that Progressives aimed to follow, regardless of what they hoped to achieve. First, a problem had to be investigated to understand exactly what was happening. Next, the public and lawmakers needed to be told what the problem was. Finally, laws had to be passed to fix the problem.

This basic approach of Progressivism is important to understand here because it helps explain why Oklahoma’s constitution is as long and complicated as it is. Most Progressives shared a belief that with enough planning and attention to detail, it was possible to write the perfect constitution, and Oklahoma statehood provided an excellent opportunity for such a grand Progressive undertaking. The movement of **Populism**, which focused on protecting the rights of individuals and limiting the power of corporations, also heavily influenced both Progressivism and the drafting of the new Oklahoma Constitution.

Populism

Industrialization changed the US economy in the 1800s. It created a stark division between the big capitalists and the laborers. The big capitalists owned the businesses and gained a lot of wealth for themselves. The laborers made the products. They often worked for low wages. These workers felt their sacrifices were only lining the pockets of the big corporations, which included major banks, newspapers, railroads, and manufacturers. Farmers in Oklahoma felt the same way. They labored hard under difficult conditions. Yet the leases on their lands continued to increase in cost. While they were struggling to make a living, it seemed others were profiting from their poor conditions.

Oklahoma farmers of the late 1800s faced a lot of obstacles. First, many droughts caused crop failures. Second, from the 1860s to the 1890s, the price of farm products fell by sixty percent. Farmers could barely make a living. They felt the politicians were not doing anything to help. The farmers united to try to gain some power over government policies. They did this by forming the Populist or People’s Party. They wanted to put in place higher food prices. They wanted lower railroad costs. They also aimed to improve mortgage policies to make them fairer for farmers. This would stop them from losing their land. The economic problems of farming families were a major focus of the populist movement. These families were feeling hopeless, and the Populists wanted more than anything to relieve their suffering. Populist farmers felt like they were in a war with the wealthy, and they were losing.

Oklahoma was full of people who were open to the Populist message. By organizing the land runs, the government had tried to keep corporations from claiming big pieces of land. The distribution of land to so many people stopped corporations from turning around and selling the land for a profit. Because of the Homestead Act laws and the land runs, farmers or farming families had mostly settled Oklahoma. They had 160 acres and were trying to live off their plots. The farmers took pride in the labor they performed to produce food for American markets. They saw themselves as poor, hard-working farmers going up against wealthy banks and railroads. Such businesses held the power to earn money by buying and selling land or to transport their products to markets. They also saw big “cattle kingdom” ranchers as the enemy, since they held big tracts of land and had more wealth than farmers.

The Populist Party was unique because women were at the center of their activities. Women participated by speaking in public meetings and writing poems and songs. They did all these things to advocate for their causes, which included family economics, education, and spreading the Populist message. Mary Elizabeth Lease, a citizen of Kansas, became one of the nation’s most important Populist speakers.

In 1896, the People’s Party in Oklahoma agreed to work together with the Democratic party. This resulted in a Democratic sweep in the territorial elections. The partnership allowed for the election of many Populists, including Cora Diehl, a twenty-one-year-old Kansan. She was the first woman to win an election for territorial office.

Education and Unions

Within the context of Progressive and Populist influences, there were two important topics that were much debated in discussions about what the state of Oklahoma might be like. A number of Progressives strongly supported free compulsory (required) education. In the years following the end of the Civil War in 1865, compulsory school laws expanded, which led to a significant increase in literacy. Supporters of public education argued strongly that the state had an obligation to provide an education to its young people. Shortly after statehood, advocates of state-funded public education won a significant victory with the passage of Senate Bill 109. The new law called for the establishment and maintenance of an agricultural high school in each of the six districts. The job of these six high schools was to educate young people in both liberal arts subjects like history, literature, and language and in agricultural science and domestic science, for example cooking and sewing.

The role of unions and the rights of both farmers and industrial workers influenced the drafting of the Oklahoma Constitution. The number of unions had steadily grown during the territorial period. For example, the Farmers’ Educational and Cooperative Union tried to protect farmers from corrupt landlords, high interest rates, and price gouging by railroads. The Twin Territorial Federation of Labor focused on fair wages and workplace safety. The United Mine Workers of America worried about the dangerous conditions and low wages that miners in Oklahoma faced. Other farming and labor unions emerged during this time and hoped to encourage state convention delegates to include protections for farmers and workers in the new constitution.

Farmers dealt with great uncertainty. They faced unpredictable weather (which the state could not control) and the rising price of farm goods. The state had no control over the weather or food prices but could perhaps exert some protection from large corporations. Industrial workers dealt with low wages and unsafe working conditions. Neither farmers nor industrial workers got near to what they wanted from the constitutional convention, but they were successful in advancing a greater understanding of the need to regulate railroads and large corporations.

Making the Oklahoma Constitution

Delegates to the Oklahoma Constitutional Convention met on November 6, 1906, in the territorial capital of Guthrie, and over the course of the next four months they drafted a constitution. In the minds of Progressives, including former Populist leader and two-time Democratic nominee for US president William Jennings Bryan, the Oklahoma Constitution was well poised to become the most perfect state constitution in the country. The original US Constitution was fewer than 5,000 words. In contrast, the finished Oklahoma Constitution was nearly 50,000 words (and more than 80,000 words by the start of the twenty-first century).



Fig. 6.5: Passed by Congress, the Enabling Act provided for a single state to be formed from the twin territories of Indian Territory and Oklahoma Territory. Each territory elected 55 delegates, and the Osage Nation elected two delegates. Of the 112 delegates, 99 were Democrats, 12 were Republicans, and 1 independent. William "Alfalfa Bill" Murray presided at the Constitutional Convention (photographed here) and played a key role in drafting the constitution. The public approved the Oklahoma Constitution by 71 percent of the vote in September 1907.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Comparing Constitution Preambles

The Oklahoma Constitution and the US Constitution both protect the rights of Oklahoma citizens. Yet as we discuss in the main text, the Oklahoma Constitution is much longer and more detailed than the US Constitution. They also both reflect the particular time and place in which they were written. The US Constitution was written in the late eighteenth century while the Oklahoma Constitution was written in the early twentieth century. Read the preambles to both constitutions and consider their similarities and differences:

Preamble to the US Constitution:

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

Preamble to the Oklahoma Constitution:

Invoking the guidance of Almighty God, in order to secure and perpetuate the blessing of liberty; to secure just and rightful government; to promote our mutual welfare and happiness, we, the people of the State of Oklahoma, do ordain and establish this Constitution.

Both constitutions are similar in that they establish three branches of government (executive, legislative, and judicial). However, the Oklahoma Constitution contains numerous provisions and policies that are highly specific. The first ten amendments of the US Constitution are called the Bill of Rights. The Oklahoma Constitution also has a Bill of Rights, containing 33 specific rights.

There are notable similarities between the Oklahoma Bill of Rights (Article II) and the Bill of Rights to the US Constitution, even though the Oklahoma Bill of Rights is much longer. For example, Section 30 of the Oklahoma Bill of Rights, which protects individuals from unreasonable search and seizure, is almost identical to the Fourth Amendment of the US Constitution. In some areas, such as freedom of religion and freedom of speech, the Oklahoma Bill of Rights is more detailed, because the framers in 1907 were particularly concerned about limiting the power of government to control the rights of citizens. We see further evidence of these concerns in sections of the new state constitution devoted to limiting the power of corporations.

The Oklahoma Constitution also included several Progressive reforms, such as direct primary elections, and the **initiative** (propose legislation by petition) process and **referendum** (repeal legislation by petition) process. These reforms gave voters a more direct say. The Oklahoma Constitution could also be amended through constitutional conventions or by legislative statutes. The new constitution provided many ways for Oklahomans to play a role in state government. In fact, the constitution has been amended more than 150 times since statehood.

It is important to keep in mind that Oklahomans are protected by and must follow both the US Constitution and the Oklahoma Constitution. They are subject to US federal laws and Oklahoma state laws. Any provision in the Oklahoma Constitution that conflicts with the US Constitution may be nullified, or canceled, by federal judicial review. The Oklahoma Statutes contain the laws passed by the Oklahoma legislature. These laws and the provisions of the Oklahoma Constitution are often interpreted by the Oklahoma Supreme Court, the Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals (the highest court in Oklahoma for criminal cases), and the Oklahoma Court of Civil Appeals. Three federal district courts in Oklahoma also issue decisions that may affect Oklahoma residents. These are the Eastern, Western, and Northern District Courts of Oklahoma. The Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals holds the authority to review decisions by federal district courts in Oklahoma. Sometimes the US Supreme Court may review a case that has been appealed from the Tenth Circuit or from the Oklahoma Supreme Court or the Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals.

It is also important to understand that the Oklahoma Constitution was very much a product of its time. Many Progressives thought that including as many rights and limitations as possible would make for a more perfect document. This assumption, however, has long been debated. Certainly the founders of the country did not follow this approach. Instead, the original framers of the US Constitution believed that a shorter, less specific, and more flexible document would have greater longevity.

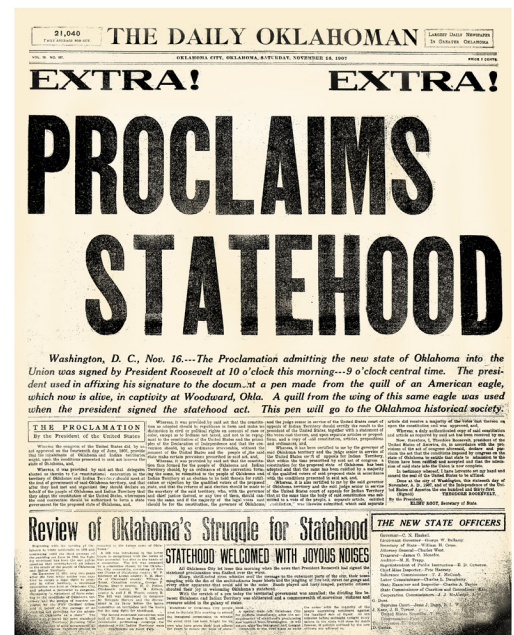


Fig. 6.6: The front page of the *Daily Oklahoman* newspaper, with the headline "Proclaims Statehood." Oklahoma became a state on November 16, 1907.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

On September 17, 1907, white men, along with some African American and Indigenous men, in Oklahoma got their chance to vote on the new, very long constitution. Among these groups, 71 percent voted in favor of the constitution. Two months later, on November 16, 1907, President Theodore Roosevelt signed legislation making Oklahoma the forty-sixth state in the Union.



Fig. 6.7: Statehood Day activities and the inauguration of Oklahoma's first governor, Charles N. Haskell, took place on November 16, 1907, in Guthrie on the front steps of the Carnegie Library. The library building is now part of the Oklahoma Territorial Museum.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Despite the length of the Oklahoma Constitution, and all its modern Progressive elements, it disappointed some residents. Progressives who supported women's suffrage were frustrated by the final result. Several western states, including Montana, Utah, and Wyoming, granted women the right to vote in the mid- to late nineteenth century as part of the push toward statehood. However, Oklahoma emerged as a state with both western and southern influences. Perhaps southern ideas about the proper place of women played a role in women not getting the right to vote at this time, or perhaps there was too little vocal support for women's suffrage. Whatever the case, the delegates to the Oklahoma Convention decided to support suffrage for men with only one exception. Women were allowed to vote in school board elections. Despite the denial of suffrage in all other areas, women in Oklahoma found other ways to influence Oklahoma politics and culture.

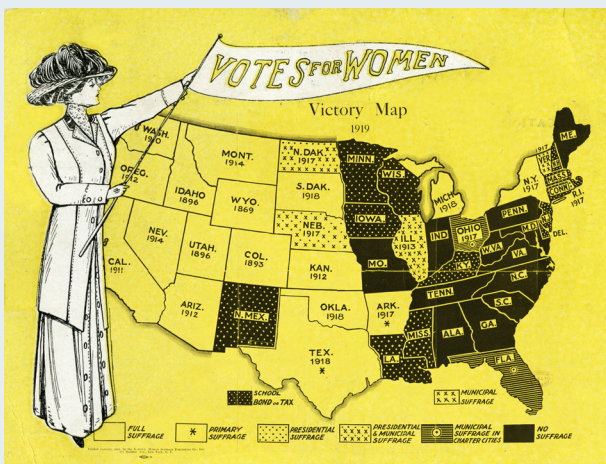


Fig. 6.8: "Votes for Women Victory Map," 1919. The vote was extended to women in Oklahoma in 1918, two years before the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified extending women's suffrage nationally in 1920. However, Black and Indigenous women continued to face voting restrictions for decades. This map shows that some states voted in favor of women's suffrage and some did not.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Women's Suffrage Movement

Many important progressive movements happened before Oklahoma was a state. One was the fight for women's suffrage. Some groups worked to get women the right to vote. These included such national organizations as the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). From 1890 to 1910, leaders like NAWSA president Carrie Chapman Catt came to Oklahoma. They worked to convince lawmakers to grant women voting rights. Some western states and territories gave the vote to women. One was Wyoming Territory in 1869. Another was Colorado in 1893. Utah and Idaho followed their lead in 1896. Oklahoma seemed more reluctant, though.

The Oklahoma Constitutional Convention met in Guthrie in 1906. This was the first chance for women's rights to become law in Oklahoma. Kate Biggers was the president of the Equal Suffrage Association of Oklahoma and Indian Territory. She came to the convention to lobby for voting rights for women. She argued that women needed the vote to protect the morality of their homes. Other women were "anti-suffragists." They worried about giving women political rights. They thought women's suffrage would take away from their roles as homemakers and guardians of virtue. Members of NAWSA went around the state to gather support. Despite all these efforts, women did not get the right to vote when Oklahoma became a new state. Cherokee citizen Narcissa Owen kept working to raise money and lobby for women to get the right to vote. She worked with her son, US Senator Robert L. Owen.

The United States entered the First World War in 1917. Women organized to work for the war effort. In Oklahoma, local chapters of the American Red Cross formed. They gathered clothing, sewed medical supplies, and hired nurses. Also, women across the nation helped with President Woodrow Wilson's campaign.

Women's suffrage groups, on both the state and national levels, kept working to pass laws to get women the right to vote. On October 5, 1918, Oklahomans voted in favor of a state constitutional amendment to grant women the right to vote. Now Oklahoma women could join men in using their political voice. More work was needed, though, to get the national amendment granting women the right to vote approved. Finally, on August 18, 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment guaranteeing women's suffrage was passed. Oklahoma joined the majority of US states in voting for this historic amendment.



Kate Barnard knew what it was like to have people listen to her. She learned quickly during the territorial days of Oklahoma that she could make her voice heard. She could get things done. And she could play a role in making the new state. She might not be able to vote, but she could influence the way other people voted.

Barnard was the only woman delegate to the Oklahoma Convention, and even she did not come to the support of women's right to vote. Although she could not vote, she was elected Oklahoma Commissioner of Charities and Corrections. She was the first woman in Oklahoma to hold such a position and only the second woman in the entire country to be elected to a public office at the state level. She went on to serve two terms and used her job to advocate for women, children (especially orphans, regardless of race), and workers.

Fig. 6.9: In 1907, Kate Barnard became the first woman elected to a statewide office in Oklahoma, as Oklahoma's first Commissioner of Charities and Corrections. This was before women could vote. A powerful orator, Barnard successfully convinced the state legislature to require compulsory education, limit child labor, and establish a juvenile justice system. In addition, Barnard called for the protection of the property rights of Indigenous orphans, as she was concerned about guardians profiting from children in their care.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.



Fig. 6.10: A newspaper clipping focusing on Cora Diehl. In 1890, at age twenty-one, Cora Diehl was elected Recorder of Deeds in Oklahoma Territory. She was the first and only woman elected to public office in the territory. A popular speaker, Diehl often accompanied other well-known Populists, including Mary Elizabeth Lease, and campaigned nationally for women's rights and labor unions.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

qualifications to fill the office by virtue of her ability and experience." The Oklahoma Supreme Court ruled in her favor, but because the suit took such a long time, she was only able to hold her office for seven months before she had to be re-elected. In the election in 1893, Diehl was not allowed to represent both the Populist and the Democratic parties, and she lost.

Diehl went on to campaign nationally for workers' rights and benefits for the unemployed. She spoke at rallies across the country for the International Brotherhood Welfare Association. She often entered political spaces where she was the only woman. Sometimes newspaper writers insulted her in their stories for speaking out "like a man," but she did not let their opinions stop her. Cora Diehl continued to fight for workers' rights for many years.

Cora Diehl

When Americans began flooding Oklahoma Territory during the late 1800s, there were no political structures yet in place. The local government had not been set up, and there was no constitution or sets of laws or government offices in existence. Because there were no settled systems of governance, an open space existed for people who previously had not been included in government. One of these people was Cora Diehl, the first and youngest woman to be elected to territorial office.

Diehl came with her parents and sister to Oklahoma Territory from Kansas. She campaigned for the Populist Party and gave speeches in rural towns to convince farmers to vote in the very first Oklahoma elections. The Populist and Democratic parties in Oklahoma joined forces to support her as a candidate for the position of Register of Deeds. She had previously held the position of Deputy Register of Deeds in Kansas. Diehl's new job would be to record and file all the legal documents that affected land property. Since Oklahoma land was being claimed and exchanged quickly, her office would be very busy.

With the combined support of both parties, Cora Diehl won the election in 1891 and should have immediately taken office. The Republicans filed a lawsuit to keep her out of office, however. They argued that her gender disqualified her from holding public office. Her party issued a statement defending Diehl's right to hold the office. It said: "We nominated and elected Cora Diehl (not as an ornament to grace the ticket) but a young woman having the necessary

The discussions about segregation, much like the discussions about women's suffrage, did not go the way that advocates of expanded rights had hoped. The vast majority of delegates were Democrats who wanted the constitution to include legal requirements that Blacks and whites be segregated. The twelve Republicans and one independent were largely silent on the issue. The only reason that segregation was not written into the constitution was that President Roosevelt made clear that he would not support statehood if that happened. However, once Oklahoma became a state, the legislature quickly moved to pass segregation laws. Senate Bill One, which required segregation of whites and Blacks in public transportation and waiting rooms, overwhelmingly passed the Oklahoma Senate a month after statehood and shortly thereafter passed the House. It was signed into law by Governor Charles N. Haskell on December 18, 1907.

Only a few Republicans had won seats in the state legislature, and most of them opposed the segregation law, but they were greatly outnumbered. The Senate voted 37 to 2 in favor of the law and the House voted 91 to 14 in favor. E. P. McCabe and other African Americans tried to challenge the new law, but it was ruled constitutional and Oklahoma's segregation laws stayed in place until the mid-1960s. New restrictions were also put in place to make it hard and sometimes impossible for Black men to vote. This meant that Black men who voted in elections before statehood (after having gained the right to vote with the adoption of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870) lost that ability in the years following statehood. However, in 1915, the US Supreme Court ruled in ***Guinn v. United States*** that some grandfather clauses, commonly used to keep African American men from voting, were unconstitutional. In Oklahoma, literacy tests had been required to vote, but exceptions were made for illiterate men who could show that their grandfathers had voted. The Supreme Court ruling was important, but it continued to be difficult for Blacks in Oklahoma to vote.

Loss of Tribal Sovereignty

For African Americans, statehood brought with it segregation and disenfranchisement, or loss of voting rights. Indigenous people faced a different situation: the loss of power they once exercised.



Fig. 6.11: A 1908 street scene in Ada, Oklahoma, located in Chickasaw Nation. One year later, in large part due to the advocacy of women in Ada, East Central College (today's East Central University) was founded as a "normal" school. Normal schools helped train teachers in the new state. Today the Chickasaw Nation Headquarters are located in Ada.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Individual Indigenous nations lost their power when they had their governments and their sovereignty stripped from them. There are several ways this happened. As discussed in previous chapters, they had to give up their lands. The effort to get rid of tribal governments was another way the US government attempted to undercut tribal sovereignty. The original Dawes Act of 1887 did not apply to Indian Territory. However, the Curtis Act in 1898 applied the Dawes Act to Indian Territory, which meant that the Five Tribes eventually ended up losing a significant amount of land in the individual land allotment process. This opened the door to increased settlement and land runs.

In addition, the Five Tribes lost control over tribal membership because the Dawes Commission assumed control of determining who was a member of the tribe and who was not. Some non-Indians made corrupt agreements to get on the Dawes Rolls and some

Indigenous people were left off of the rolls because they did not trust the government enough to enroll with the Dawes Commission. Tribes not only lost control over deciding who was a member of the tribe, they lost control over their own laws and government. Perhaps the worst part of the Curtis Act in relation to Indigenous sovereignty was the provision that called for tribal governments to be abolished by March 6, 1906, which put those residing in Indian Territory under federal law and jurisdiction. Tribal courts were abolished and there was no longer a way for tribes to make and enforce law. This was devastating for Indigenous people, and they spent the next several decades working to retake and strengthen the rights that were taken from them.

Conclusion

A lot of changes took place in Oklahoma during the years leading up to statehood.



photograph in front of their one-room schoolhouse in 1910. Free public education was required in the Oklahoma Constitution of 1907. Often this meant a one-room schoolhouse with one teacher for grades 1–8.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

One thing that makes Oklahoma an especially interesting state is how much promise the idea of Oklahoma held for so many different groups of people. Women did not get the right to vote (aside from in school board elections) until 1918, but Oklahoma nevertheless offered many women opportunities they did not have elsewhere. For many of the new homesteaders who poured into Oklahoma ahead of statehood, Oklahoma was their last best chance to acquire land and carve out a better life for themselves and their families.

Fig. 6.12: The students and teachers of Rural School District No. 35 in western Oklahoma near Arapaho in Custer County assemble for a



This was true for African Americans who flocked to cities like Langston. This was true for new immigrants who traveled to the United States and eventually to Oklahoma from countries like Germany, Czechoslovakia (present-day Czech Republic and Slovakia), Poland, and Italy. This was true for poor white southerners desperate to own land that they could farm. But the cost was great.

The dispossession of Indigenous land and loss of tribal sovereignty were central to the making of Oklahoma. The reassertion of tribal sovereignty, the preservation of Indigenous language and culture, and the ongoing negotiation between the state and its thirty-nine Indigenous Nations would define Oklahoma well into the next century. Oklahoma has been both a place of great dreams and a place of intense hardship. The next chapter explores the challenges faced by farmers and other groups who so desperately clung to hopes for peace and prosperity in the face of great state, national, and global turmoil.

Fig. 6.13: This Oklahoma State Fair poster from 1912 was placed in the Oklahoma Century Chest on April 22, 1913, at the First Lutheran Church in Oklahoma City. When the chest was opened one hundred years later on April 22, 2013, the poster was in excellent condition.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Short Answer Questions

- 1 What was the Sequoyah Movement? Which groups supported this statehood plan? Why?
- 2 Identify two Progressive movement ideals that influenced the new state of Oklahoma.
- 3 How did the Enabling Act help to create the single state of Oklahoma?
- 4 Explain why Black Oklahoman leaders like E. P. McCabe were disappointed in Senate Bill 1.
- 5 What does it mean that African Americans and tribal members were disenfranchised under the new state government?

Short Response Questions

- 1 What was gained and what was lost when Indian Territory became the state of Oklahoma? In your response, be sure to include the perspectives of the different groups of people who lived in Oklahoma at the time.
- 2 How did the national Progressive movement influence the Oklahoma Constitution? In your response, be sure to include two progressive ideals that were included in the new state constitution.