Reconstruction, the Choctaw, along with African Americans, faced the brunt of Jim Crow laws.

**Contemporary Choctaw**

Two Choctaw tribes exist today. The Mississippi Choctaw live on a reservation, which is land they control and that belongs to them. The Oklahoma members live on trust land, which is owned by the federal government. Each of the tribes has its own police, laws, and governments. Yet, they are also U.S. citizens, and as such must adhere to American laws, too. Today's elections of Choctaw chiefs are much like elections for senators or governors. They have blended their indigenous ways with colonial customs, which include adopting a more European form of dress and practicing the Judeo-Christian religion.

Sonya Alexander
Independent Scholar

See Also: Code Talkers; Indian Removal Act (1830); Native Americans; Trail of Tears.

**Further Readings**


---

**Cinco de Mayo**

The Cinco de Mayo (5th of May) holiday has been celebrated in California since 1863 and has subsequently spread to other states. Although Cinco de Mayo is sometimes conflated with Mexican Independence Day (September 16, 1810), the first Cinco de Mayo celebration commemorated the battle of Puebla (May 5, 1862), when the Mexican army temporarily defeated invading French troops. Later observations of Cinco de Mayo celebrated Mexican heritage, identity, culture, and pride.

Despite Cinco de Mayo being observed by people from diverse backgrounds, Mexican immigrants have been instrumental in planning and executing the celebrations. This has resulted in Cinco de Mayo becoming less about Puebla, and more about Mexican culture within the United States. Cinco de Mayo has frequently included U.S. and Mexican flags and memorialized U.S. historical figures of Mexican ancestry, like César E. Chávez, and Mexican historical figures, like Frida Kahlo. Cinco de Mayo has also come to represent the United States’ and Mexico’s joint history in defending freedom in North America.

**Battle of the Puebla**

While the United States, under the leadership of Abraham Lincoln, was immersed in its Civil War (1861–65), Mexico struggled to keep its sovereignty from Napoleon III of France. Mexico’s troubles with France began in December 1857, when Mexican conservatives, seeking to reestablish elite privileges, revolted against a newly formed liberal government. To fund their war effort, conservatives borrowed money from Spain, Great Britain, and France. After three years of bloodshed, Benito Juárez (president of Mexico from 1858 to 1872) and his liberal army regained control of Mexico City, marking a short-lived peace in Mexico. Juárez inherited the conservative government’s debt to Spain, Great Britain, and France. Lacking the capital to repay the loans, Juárez declared on July 17, 1861, the first battle of the U.S. Civil War—that he would suspend payments of foreign debt for two years.

In 1862, France, Spain, and England pressured Mexico by landing troops on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico. After a few weeks, only France remained, and it became clear that Napoleon III had aspirations of conquest. Because the Mexican army had been routed by the United States in 1848, most Europeans believed that France’s
elite army would swiftly defeat Mexican forces and easily take control. Therefore, the world was dumbfounded when the French clashed with local forces in Puebla on May 5, 1862, and the Mexicans won. However, French forces eventually captured Puebla, and Mexico City succumbed in 1863. Even though French troops occupied Mexico until 1867, the battle of Puebla created a sense of national pride and unity for Mexicans in Mexico and the United States alike. In May 1863, California became the first state to celebrate the Mexican victory at Puebla.

**Mexican Immigration**
The Gold Rush (1848–55) had attracted many Mexicans to California. These newcomers joined Californians of Mexican ancestry who came to California before 1847, when the region was still part of Mexico. These people followed the events of the War of French Intervention almost as closely as they did those of the U.S. Civil War. Moreover, Californians of Mexican ancestry and Mexican immigrants made a conscious effort to observe Cinco de Mayo because of its social implications. At the time of the battle of Puebla, Westerners believed that Mexico and the rest of Latin America lacked civilization and culture. Mexico’s victory at Puebla provided people of Latin American ancestry with pride and suggested that perhaps Mexico and Latin America not as backward as critics thought.

Early-20th-century America saw another wave of Mexican immigrants searching for work and refuge from the Mexican Revolution (1910–30). These new immigrants began to outnumber Mexican Americans and Cinco de Mayo began to reflect their new perspectives and experiences. By the 1930s, third-generation Mexican Americans were participating in Cinco de Mayo celebrations organized by first-generation immigrants. This ensured that Cinco de Mayo celebrations in the United States were a reflection of Mexican culture, while maintaining roots in the United States. Cinco de Mayo has also been used by politicians to gain support from constituents who identify with Mexican heritage.

**Politics, Culture, and Identity**
During World War II, U.S. politicians used Cinco de Mayo as a way to obtain support for the war effort from Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans by invoking the interrelated nature of the American Civil War and the War of the French Intervention and the pride and traditions of Mexican people in the United States and Mexico. This trend has continued into the 21st century. For example, in 2005 President George W. Bush held a Cinco de Mayo celebration in which he thanked Latinos serving in the U.S. armed forces in an attempt to gain Latino supporters for the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 1998, the U.S. Postal Service released a special edition Cinco de Mayo stamp portraying two baile folklórico (folkloric dancers). This stamp is a testament to Cinco de Mayo’s importance to people of Mexican heritage, and the impact these people have had in the United States.

Thus, Cinco de Mayo, which began as a celebration of Mexican pride and a victory for democracy, has become a holiday dedicated to Mexican identity and the contributions Mexicans have made to U.S. culture and success. The tradition was not inherited from Mexico but originated in California in 1863, and shortly thereafter spread to other parts of the country. In the United States, Cinco de Mayo has little to do with Puebla, Napoleon III, or the war debt, but rather grants people of Mexican heritage an opportunity to celebrate Mexican culture and identity.

Edward A. Polanco  
*University of Arizona*

Nancy J. Parezo  
*University of Arizona*

**See Also:** Californios; Día de los Muertos; Mexican-American War; Mexican Americans; Mexican Revolution.

**Further Readings**
