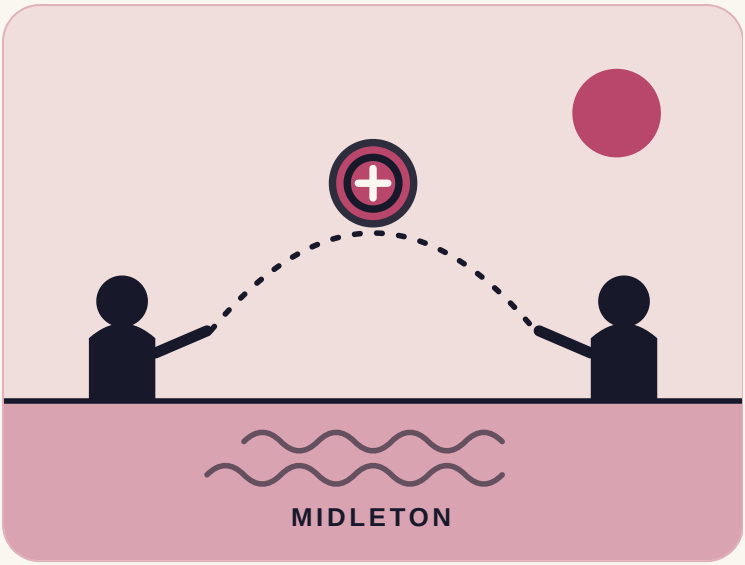


IRELAND

# The $170 gift that came back

In 1847, the Choctaw Nation sent $170 to starving Ireland. In 2020, Irish donors helped the Navajo and Hopi.

| | |
|---|---|
| WHERE | Midleton |
| WHO | The Choctaw Nation and the Irish people, who helped each other across 170 years |
| WHEN | 1847 to 2020 |

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

# The story

In 1847, Ireland was starving. A disease had destroyed the potato crop. About 1 million people died of hunger or illness between 1845 and 1849, the New York Times reports. Another 1 million left the country.

That year, the Choctaw Nation, in what is now Oklahoma, heard about it. At a meeting, they collected money for the starving. Reports say they sent $170 to Irish families. That is more than $5,000 today.

It was a generous gift from people who were poor themselves. Only 16 years earlier, the United States had forced the Choctaw from their homes in Mississippi. This was the Trail of Tears. More than a quarter of the Choctaw died on the way, Global Sisters Report says.

> **When our ancestors heard of the famine and the hardship of the Irish people, they knew it was time to help.**
>
> GARY BATTON, CHIEF OF THE CHOCTAW NATION, IN 2017

## A thank-you, long overdue

In 1989, an Irish human rights worker went to Oklahoma to thank the Choctaw. They said no one had done so since 1847. In 1990, Choctaw leaders led an Irish famine walk in County Mayo. In 1995, Ireland's

president, Mary Robinson, visited Oklahoma. In 2017, a sculpture honouring the gift was unveiled in Midleton, County Cork.

**$170**

sent by the Choctaw in 1847, more than $5,000 today

**1.8 million**

dollars raised for Navajo and Hopi families by 5 May 2020

**1 million**

Irish people who died in the famine, by one estimate

## The favour returned

In March 2020, a fundraiser began for Navajo and Hopi families hit by COVID-19. On 2 May, an Irish Times reporter shared it on Twitter. Irish people began to give. By 5 May, it had raised more than $1.8 million, with hundreds of thousands from Irish donors.

Many mentioned the Choctaw. “I’d already known what the Choctaw did in the famine,” said Sean Callahan, a donor in Cork City. He noted it came “so short a time after they’d been through the Trail of Tears.”

Cassandra Begay, a Navajo organiser, said, “The Choctaw ancestors planted that seed a long time ago.” Later reports gave a total of more than $2.6 million.

## How it unfolded

- **1831** The Choctaw are forced from their homes on the Trail of Tears.
- **1847** The Choctaw send $170 to starving Irish families.
- **1990** Choctaw leaders lead an Irish famine walk in County Mayo.
- **1995** Ireland's president Mary Robinson visits the Choctaw in Oklahoma.
- **2017** A sculpture honouring the gift is unveiled in Midleton.
- **2020** Irish donors give to Navajo and Hopi families hit by COVID-19.

CHAPTER TWO

# What makes it special

Both gifts came from people who had little to spare.

The Choctaw knew what it meant to suffer, and the Irish never forgot what they had been given.

OUR TAKE

*A small gift, given by people who had little, was remembered and returned almost two centuries later.*

CHAPTER THREE

# What we can learn

### 1 Give from empathy, not from plenty

The Choctaw had suffered themselves, and they still sent help.

**Try this:** When you hear of someone's trouble, give something small, even if you have little.

### 2 Say thank you, even late

In 1989, an Irish visitor went to Oklahoma to thank the Choctaw.

**Try this:** Thank someone who helped you long ago.

### 3 Tell stories of kindness

The Choctaw gift was retold for generations, and Irish donors remembered it.

**Try this:** Tell a child one story of kindness this week.

### 4 Pass kindness on

Irish donors helped the Navajo and Hopi, who are different peoples from the Choctaw.

**Try this:** When someone helps you, help the next person in need.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

## Kindness has a long memory.

# Sources

**The Salt Lake Tribune (The New York Times)**
Irish return an old favor, helping Native Americans battling the coronavirus (2020)

**Global Sisters Report**
Years of friendship continues between Choctaw Nation, Irish people (2020)

**IrishCentral**
Irish donations to Native Americans (2020)

**Fact-check note:** The three sources agree on the main story. The sum: the New York Times (via The Salt Lake Tribune) says the Choctaw gathered $170 in 1847, more than $5,000 today; Global Sisters Report says "some reports say $170", and says the money was raised at a meeting in Skullyville, in the Oklahoma Territory, recorded by the Arkansas Intelligencer and Niles Weekly Register; IrishCentral also says $170, about $5,000 today. We could not open a primary record, and the figure is an estimate in the reports, so the story says "reports say". The famine: the New York Times says an estimated 1 million Irish people died of hunger or disease from 1845 to 1849 and about 1 million emigrated; Global Sisters Report says over 1 million died. The Trail of Tears began in 1831 (New York Times; Global Sisters Report); Global Sisters Report says more than a quarter of the Choctaw population died of starvation, exposure and disease; IrishCentral says about 60,000 Native Americans suffered the Trail of Tears. The story says 16 years earlier, from Global Sisters Report, and that the Choctaw were forced from their homes in Mississippi. The Choctaw chief's words are from the New York Times, which quotes Gary Batton writing in 2017. The 1989 visit, the remark that it was the first thanks since 1847, the 1990 famine walk in County Mayo, and Mary Robinson's visit in 1995 are from Global Sisters Report, whose author was the sister of the Irish man who made the 1989 visit and so is a personal account; the New York Times also mentions Robinson's visit in connection with the 150th anniversary in 1995. The sculpture was dedicated in 2017 in Midleton, Ireland (New York Times, which also calls it a sculpture in County Cork); Midleton is in County Cork. The fundraiser: the New York Times says it had raised more than $1.8 million by Tuesday 5 May, with hundreds of thousands from Irish donors, and that an Irish Times reporter posted about it on 2 May; IrishCentral says it began in March and had raised more than $2.6 million, with a headline of nearly $3 million; the story gives the earliest and the later totals as reports. Sean Callahan's quote is in the New York Times; Cassandra Begay's quote and role are in the New York Times. The donations went to the

Navajo and Hopi families, not to the Choctaw themselves. The Smithsonian and NPR pages could not be opened (403 and 404), and Wikipedia has no article with the exact title we tried. We did not check later totals or later events. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.