What Actually Happened...

On July 9th, the Peace Commissioners sent word to Chief Bowles' camp, with the request "Come and see us and we will talk more fully… [we] will give you and as many of you head men as you choose to bring, safe escort to our camp."

Bowles met with the Peace Commission, but asked for more time in the hopes that additional Cherokee leaders could be present. Representatives of the Peace Commission told him that if the Cherokee continued to be "friendly with the wild Indians and Mexicans, we will be forced to kill your people in defense of our frontier. You are between two fires and if you remain you will be destroyed." Chief Bowles again asked for more time. Despite additional discussions, the negotiations went nowhere.

As the Cherokees rode back to their camp on the morning of July 15, the Texas Army prepared to attack. Three miles north of their abandoned campsite, the Texans engaged the rear guard of Bowles' people in a brief firefight. In the initial battle, the Indians were defeated, losing eighteen men to the Texans' three. After gathering provisions left behind by the fleeing Cherokees, the Texans followed in pursuit. The Texan force numbered 250-300, and included many leaders of the Republic. Combined Indian forces of Cherokee, Shawnee, Delaware, and Kickapoo were probably twice that number.

Taking up a position in the Neches River bottom, the Indians were able to repel two charges by the Texas forces. The fighting became hand-to-hand in some places, and eyewitnesses claimed both sides battled courageously. When the firing stopped, a hundred Indian warriors lay dead and dying in the Neches River bottom; three Texans had been killed and thirty more wounded. Among the dead was Chief Bowles.

John H. Reagan, a participant of the fighting recalled: "Chief Bowl displayed great courage…He remained on the field on horseback, wearing a military hat, silk vest, and handsome sword and sash which had been presented to him by President Houston. He was a magnificent picture of barbaric manhood and was very conspicuous during the whole battle, being the last to leave the field when the Indians retreated. His horse, however, was now disabled, and he dismounted, after having been wounded himself. As he walked away he was shot in the back and fell. Then, as he sat up with his face toward us, I started toward him with a view to secure his surrender. At the same time my captain, Bob Smith, with a pistol in his hand, ran toward him from farther down the line. We reached him at the same instant, and realizing what was imminent, I called, 'Captain, don't shoot him.' But he fired, striking Bowl in the head, and killing him instantly."

The Native Americans were chased across the Red River into Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma). According to Brigadier General H.K. Douglass, commander of the Texas Army, "This devastating march was continued up to the 25th, until the entire Cherokee country had been traversed and Indian trails had disappeared. Houses were burnt and…destroyed every day until none remained. All cattle and other livestock were appropriated…On the 25th orders were issued for the companies to be marched home by different routes and mustered out of service, which was done."

The defeat and expulsion of the Cherokee changed life for many other Native Americans in Texas. In the aftermath of fighting, many of the weaker or more peaceful Indigenous people in East Texas were also forced to relocate. By 1841, East Texas was almost entirely cleared of Native Americans.

SOURCES:
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