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Slave Descendants Lose Tribal Status

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

OKLAHOMA CITY, March 3 (AP) — Cherokee Nation members voted Saturday to revoke the tribal citizenship of an estimated 2,800 descendants of the people the Cherokee once owned as slaves.

With a majority of districts reporting, 76 percent had voted in favor of an amendment to the tribal constitution that would limit citizenship to descendants of “by blood” tribe members as listed on a federal commission’s rolls from more than 100 years ago.

The group, called the Dawes Commission, was set up by a Congress bent on breaking up Indians’ collective lands and parceling them out to tribal citizens. The commission drew up two rolls, one listing Cherokees by blood and the other listing freedmen that contained the names of blacks regardless of whether they had Indian blood.

Some opponents of the ballot question voted on Saturday argued that efforts to remove freedmen from the tribe were motivated by racism.

Marilyn Vann, president of the Oklahoma City-based Descendants of Freedmen of the Five Civilized Tribes, said: “They make it sound like the tribe will be doomed if these people aren’t cast out. They’re taking away the rights of people.”

Tribal officials said the vote was a matter of self-determination.

“The importance of the vote today is that it gives the Cherokee people the opportunity to decide the citizenship of their nation,” a tribal spokesman, Mike Miller, said.

The petition drive for the ballot measure followed a March 2006 ruling by the Cherokee Nation Supreme Court that said an 1866 treaty assured freedmen descendants of tribal citizenship. Since then, more than 2,000 freedmen descendants have enrolled as citizens of the tribe.

Court challenges by freedmen descendants seeking to stop the election were denied, but a federal judge left open the possibility that the case could be refiled if Cherokees voted to lift their membership rights.