The story of how Susan La Flesche Picotte became the first Native American doctor in the United States did not begin with her birth. No, it all started with her father. Here’s how that story began.

One day in 1854, Susan’s father, Joseph La Flesche, whose last name meant “arrow,” traveled by train to Washington, D.C., as part of an important delegation of seven Omaha chiefs. They were going there to sign a life-altering treaty.

The Omaha tribe hoped that if they gave away a portion of their traditional territory, the U.S. government would allow them to stay on the remaining Omaha tribal land. Many other tribes had been forcibly moved off their traditional lands to cramped, undesirable plots thousands of miles away. The Omaha tribe dreaded the same thing happening to them.

delegation: group of people who represent others
For generation after generation, long before settlers came to America, the Omaha tribe didn’t believe that it was possible to actually possess land. They said the earth couldn’t be owned by a person any more than the rain could be owned. So when the settlers began claiming tribal areas for themselves, members of the Omaha tribe were puzzled. Then the settlers began hunting the bison, a crucial food source for Natives, and the Omaha tribe began to starve.

Something had to be done.

Once Joseph reached Washington, D.C., he couldn’t believe the huge scope of the city. Exiting the train station, he felt overwhelmed by the wide cobblestone streets and the tall brick buildings. The city was not what made the biggest impression on him, though. It was the people!

Years later, in a letter to his brother, he warned, “Look ahead and you will see nothing but the white man.”

Joseph, whose Native name was Iron Eye, and the Omaha tribe had decided on a plan to embrace the white man’s ways without giving up too many of the tribe’s traditions and language. When they signed the new treaty, they handed over almost six million acres to the U.S. government. In return, they would get to keep three hundred thousand acres. That left an area thirty miles long by fifteen miles wide in the Blackbird region of northeast Nebraska.
But the deal was not without compromises. Big ones. The Omaha tribe would have to change many of their traditional ways.

For instance, they could no longer hunt bison outside of Omaha territory. Instead, they were required to make a living as farmers, which would be a departure from their protein-heavy bison diet. And a plot of land would be given to each family. Instead of community land that they worked for the good of the whole tribe, landowners would live and work on allotted plots. There would be no more tepees or earth lodges, which were vital to the traditions of the Omaha tribe.
In return, the Omaha tribe would be paid $40,000 annually for thirty years, but the money would go into a trust to maintain various services the government felt were necessary. Tribal members who wanted to access the funds, for anything from farming equipment to a new blanket, would have to make a formal request to the Omaha Indian Agency. Permission was often a long time coming, if it came at all.

When the Omaha tribe delegation signed the treaty, they saved the tribe from having to leave Nebraska. They would be able to keep some traditions and even their language. But they lost the ability to govern themselves. From then on, the U.S. government would control most aspects of their lives.

Susan’s father, Joseph, and the Omaha tribe chief, Big Elk II, also known as Young Elk, found that they held common beliefs about how best to navigate their future and protect their people and their land. Young Elk’s father, the first Chief Big Elk, had been the first one to understand that in order to hold on to some of their land, they would have to accommodate a great many of the incoming settlers. Chief Big Elk had visited Washington, D.C., in 1837 and had returned to his people with the

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**trust**: financial relationship in which one group manages property to benefit another group

**accommodate**: make space for
view that it would be impossible to stop the coming flood of settlers.

But Young Elk had another problem besides trying to hold on to some of his people’s land. His young son had always been sickly, and he knew his boy would never live to be chief. Young Elk wanted the next leader to be able to guide his people and protect them. He admired Joseph, who had grown up traveling with his French father, a fur trader. Joseph spoke French as well as Omaha and several other Native languages, and he had dealt with different people all his life.

But Young Elk and Joseph weren’t related by blood. And leadership among the Omaha tribe passed down from father to son.

So Young Elk adopted Joseph in a public ceremony, even though Joseph was already twenty-eight years old and married. When Young Elk passed away in 1853, Joseph took over as chief of the Elk clan. He became the principal chief of the tribe in 1855.

Joseph continued the work of Big Elk. He built the first plaster-and-wood-frame house, complete with two stories, on Plains tribal land. He had already adopted Euro-American clothing and instituted a ban on alcohol, with drunkenness being punishable by public flogging.

*instituted:* established
He even invited the Presbyterian community to build a church and a school on their reservation.

But Joseph also respected and carried on some of the old ways, such as traditional ceremonies and religious customs. He did not interfere with Omaha tribal members who still dressed in bison robes or worshipped Wakonda, the great creator.
Though some firmly rejected assimilation, for the most part, Joseph had the support of his people. They saw the tragedy of other tribes forced to move off ancestral grounds and understood that their way of life had to change or they would face the same fate.

This was the world that Susan, later known as Dr. Sue, came into.

assimilation: process of becoming culturally similar to another group