

PRESBYTERIAN MISSION SCHOOLS AMONG THE CHOCTAWS AND CHICKASAWS 1845-1861

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SCHOOLS

Presbyterian missionaries received the opportunity to conduct schools among the Choctaws and Chickasaws in the Indian Territory through the invitations of the tribal councils. These were extended first to the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and later to the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church (Old School).

The National Council of the Choctaw Nation in 1845 offered to transfer Spencer Academy to the care and direction of the Presbyterian Board. The offer was accepted; and the school, which had been established by the Choctaws three years earlier, was opened by the Presbyterian Board in February 1846 with sixty pupils.¹

In 1859 the missions and schools of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (a missionary organization with large Congregational support) were turned over to the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions.² This transfer took place because the American Board had become increasingly dissatisfied with the attitude toward slavery held by the Presbyterian missionaries in their employ. Because of this transfer several schools, organized and

¹ Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterian Missions in the Southern United States* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1934), p. 144.

(The first mission stations of the American Board in the Choctaw Nation, West, were Bethabara and Wheelock established in 1832. Choctaw missions in Mississippi were closed by 1834. In 1838, there were twelve schools in operation in the Choctaw Nation with teachers appointed by the Choctaw Agent, U.S., and salaries paid by Choctaw treaty stipulation. Of these twelve schools, five were located at mission stations with the missionary in charge of each appointed as teacher. Missions in operation [1838], each with a school, were: 5 Presbyterian [American Board], 4 Methodist, 4 Baptist. A special committee of Choctaw citizens was appointed during the meeting of the General Council in 1841, to select the site and contract for the erection of a boys' school in the nation, west. This school was established as Spencer Academy, that took the place of the noted Choctaw Academy at Blue Springs, Kentucky, which had been the outgrowth of a Baptist Indian mission school in operation at that place in 1818. The buildings at Spencer Academy were completed and the first pupils admitted to the school in 1844. It was operated as a national academy until placed under the supervision of the Presbyterian Board two years later. Spencer Academy was noted in the education of Choctaw boys in the history of the Nation, West.—Ed.)

² The Presbyterian Historical Society of Philadelphia, Pa., possesses an extensive file of unpublished missionary correspondence and reports. This source will be cited: Mission Reports, Box number, volume, and page.

conducted by Presbyterian missionaries, came under the care of the Presbyterian Board.³ The schools transferred were Iyanubbi Female Seminary at Stockbridge Mission, near Eagletown, the Reverend Cyrus Byington, Missionary;⁴ Chuahla Female Seminary at Pine Ridge, near Doaksville, the Reverend Cyrus Kingsbury, Missionary and Superintendent;⁵ Wheelock Female Seminary at Wheelock Mission, the Reverend John Edwards, Superintendent; Koonsha (Kusha) Female Seminary at Goodwater, the Reverend George Ainslee, Superintendent.

All these schools were supported from Choctaw tribal funds and from mission board contributions. An Act of the Choctaw General Council on November 29, 1842, had provided a system of public boarding schools in the Choctaw Nation.⁶ The sum of \$6,000 was due the Nation annually from the United States for educational purposes under the treaty made at Washington, D.C.,⁷ in 1825, besides additional sums for education by the terms of other treaties, in lieu of payment for their tribal lands given up by the Choctaws to the United States. Contracts between the Choctaw General Council and the mission boards for the annual support of the larger tribal boarding schools was made on the basis of three-fourths of the amount to be supplied by the Choctaws and one-fourth by the Mission Board. The total cost of operating Spencer Academy was approximately \$10,000 per annum, of which the Choctaws paid \$6,000. The annual contribution by the Presbyterian Board often exceeded the sum stipulated by contract, averaging \$3,000 a year for Spencer during a period of fourteen years up to 1860. The annual sum of \$2,000 was allowed out of the U. S. Indian Civilization fund, usually paid out directly to the Mission Board.⁸

The Choctaws have been noted in their history for their strong interest in education, as early as 1820 having devoted all their tribal annuities for schools established under the auspices of the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions. The first missionaries among the Choctaws and the Chickasaws had been encouraged to begin mission work because of the desire of the people of these two tribes to secure schools for their children.

³ The various missionaries who supervised schools reported to the Indian agent concerning their work. This information was transmitted by the Indian agent to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs. This source will be cited: *Indian Affairs*, year, and page.

⁴ *Indian Affairs*, 1855, p. 156.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁶ This Act of the Choctaw General Council in 1842, also provided for the establishment of Fort Coffee Academy for boys and a seminary (later called New Hope) for girls under the supervision of the Methodist Episcopal Church South. In 1844 Armstrong Academy for boys was established under the supervision of the Baptist American Indian Mission Association.—Ed.

⁷ Mission Reports, Box 9, II, p. 501.

⁸ *Indian Affairs*, 1860, p. 360.

The Chickasaws in 1852 gave evidence of their great interest in a good school system. In that year, to improve the buildings, they appropriated five thousand dollars more than called for by their contract with the Mission Board and with the Department of Indian Affairs. They wanted facilities for one hundred pupils, and accordingly added another thousand dollars for additional school-rooms.⁹

In many ways the people of the Choctaw and the Chickasaw Nations proved their interest in education. They discouraged truancy. They sacrificed the services of the children at home in order that they might attend Spencer Academy or another boarding school. It was not uncommon for hundreds of parents and friends to be present at commencement exercises in May of each year. The examinations held prior to commencement lasted "twenty solid hours", according to a government witness.¹⁰ Samuel M. Rutherford, Acting Superintendent of the Western Reserve, reported concerning the students of Spencer Academy that "whatever they had learned at all, had evidently been taught thoroughly."¹¹

Year after year the schools had capacity enrollments. This is proof that citizens of the nations were pleased with the schools and their curricula. However, it must not be inferred that all the Choctaws and Chickasaws wholeheartedly supported the educational program controlled by Presbyterian missionaries. Many of the minority groups were indifferent. Although some did not endorse the schools, they were not actively antagonistic.¹² The Reverend S. O. Lee of Spencer Academy characterized the more radical members of the anti-school minority among the Choctaws in early 1860 thus:¹³

There are those in the Nation who would be glad to see all the schools broken up in order to keep the mass of the people in ignorance, that they might retain their influence the more easily, for, with the increase in intelligence among them the full-bloods are rapidly gaining their place in influencing the affairs of the Nation.

⁹ Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions, *Annual Report*, May 1852, p. 819. (The first mission among the Chickasaws in Mississippi was Charity Hall established under the auspices of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in 1819. In 1821, the Missionary Society of the Presbyterian Synod of South Carolina and Georgia established Monroe Mission among the Chickasaws, four schools being in operation in 1826. After the removal to the West, three boarding schools were opened in 1852, under provisions of the Chickasaw Council: Wapanucka Institute for girls, under the auspices of the Presbyterian Mission Board; Chickasaw Manual Labor School for boys, and Bloomfield Academy for girls, under the auspices of the Methodist Church. Colbert Institute [later Collins] was established at Perryville in 1854, by the Methodist Church. In 1859, Burney Institute for Chickasaw girls was opened under the auspices of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church.—Ed.)

¹⁰ *Indian Affairs*, 1852, p. 423.

¹¹ *Indian Affairs*, 1847, p. 940.

¹² *Mission Reports*, Box 12, I, p. 71.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

The mixed bloods had achieved an early prestige but the education which the fullbloods secured at the schools conducted by the missionaries enabled them to hold a strong position and control in the affairs of the Nation. During the year 1860 approximately five hundred students were enrolled in Choctaw schools operated under the supervision of the Presbyterian Board. Of this number 167 were "boarding scholars."¹⁴

It is evident that the missionaries were impressed with the native ability, talent, and character of the Choctaws and Chickasaws. The curriculum maintained by the various schools reveals that the Indian was regarded as one who had not received opportunities for cultural advancement through Christian education; in no case was the Indian believed to have been born with inferior mentality. The studies pursued in the higher classes in the Choctaw schools were:¹⁵ "Reading, Writing, Orthography, Arithmetic, English Grammar, Geography, United States History, Algebra, and English Composition." Some of the textbooks used were:¹⁶ "Swift's First Lessons in Natural Philosophy, Greenleaf's Mental Arithmetic, Comstock's Youth's Book on Astronomy, Emerson's Historical Catechism of the Bible, and Gallaudet's Natural Theology."

Some time was found every day except Sunday for vocational instruction. The girls received "constant instruction in needle, household, and all kinds of work that properly fall to the share of woman in civilized domestic economy."¹⁷

The boys were required to spend two hours and a half every day except Sunday in agricultural and mechanical labor under the direction of their teacher. Most of the schools operated small farms on which some grain and many kinds of vegetables were grown. Orchards supplied a variety of fruit. Sufficient pork and beef was raised so that very little had to be purchased. The various subsidiary interests of the schools provided the Indian boys with abundant opportunities for manual labor.¹⁸

Classes were held from 8:30 in the morning to 1:30 in the afternoon. The schools "were daily opened and closed with religious exercises."¹⁹ Throughout the day the students were required to speak the English language exclusively. Very seldom was a Choctaw word spoken except when friends visited the students.²⁰

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹⁵ Mission Reports, Box 12, I, p. 227.

¹⁶ *Indian Affairs*, 1846, p. 348.

¹⁷ Mission Reports, Box 12, I, p. 227. (The Act of the General Council in 1842 [*Constitution and Laws of the Choctaw Nation*, 1869, p. 80] provided: "Instruction in Agriculture and the Mechanical Arts shall, in the male schools, be combined with instruction in letters; and in the female schools, in addition to letters, the pupils shall be instructed in housewifery and sewing, &c."—Ed.)

¹⁸ *Indian Affairs*, 1859, p. 571.

¹⁹ *Indian Affairs*, 1848, p. 501.

²⁰ *Loc. cit.*

Religious instruction was not slighted. Schools were opened daily with prayer and Bible reading. On Sundays all students were required to attend Sunday School where they read and memorized passages from Scripture and the Shorter Catechism. Brief devotional periods were scheduled for every evening after supper.²¹

The religious education which formed an integral part of Indian school instruction was neither novel nor extra-ordinary. To foster Christian education was characteristic of many educational institutions, including those supported by the state government. At a meeting of the Board of Trustees of the University of Mississippi held in Oxford July 12, 1848, "... it was . . . definitely settled that the University should have stamped upon it such religious and moral character in its work as would be acceptable to the Christian people who compose a large majority of the people of the State of Mississippi."²² The majority of the Board of Trustees at the same meeting favored "... the introduction of the Evidences of Christianity into the curriculum and establishing the University on a basis distinctly Christian."²³

All students preparing for the ministry were admitted without tuition.²⁴ Students were required to attend prayer services and the closing exercises of each day were closed with prayer by the President.²⁵

TEACHERS

Responsibility for the success of the missionary schools devolved upon the teachers. Most of the teachers were young women, the majority of whom came from the northeastern section of the United States. Doctor Cyrus Kingsbury believed that the women instructors would provide a beneficent influence and a cultural atmosphere.²⁶

In the mid-nineteenth century travel facilities from New England to the Indian Territory were neither luxurious nor safe. The long journey was made by boat and stagecoach. After the teachers arrived it was readily apparent that there was more than enough work for each adventurous spirit.

In addition to teaching several classes, the teachers were expected to supervise the domestic chores of the students in kitchen and

²¹ *Indian Affairs*, 1859, p. 567.

²² *Historical Catalogue of the University of Mississippi 1849-1909* (Nashville: Marshall & Bruce Co., 1910), p. 7.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁴ Florence E. Cambell, "Journal of the Minutes of the Board of Trustees of the University of Mississippi 1845-1860." University of Mississippi Thesis, unpublished, University, Mississippi, 1939, p. 98.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

²⁶ *Mission Reports*, Box 9, II, p. 549. (See article on "Women Teachers in Oklahoma, 1820 to 1860," in this number of *The Chronicles*.—Ed.)

dining room. They were also pressed into service for Sunday School instruction.

Such a rigorous weekly routine in a new country where malaria was prevalent and epidemics spread from the river ports in the east often contributed to a physical breakdown of the teachers. Some would sufficiently regain their health during the summer vacation so that they were able to continue their work in the fall. Many who came as teachers spent years in the Choctaw and the Chickasaw schools.

The men who served the schools as teachers or superintendents were expected to take a part in the church work of the Mission. Overwork resulted from this requirement of dual service.

SCHOOL PROBLEMS

As a consequence of the great amount of work to be done, there was a constant shortage of teachers because few could maintain such a strenuous schedule. This condition in turn had its effect upon the morale and scholarship of the students. For this reason Ainslie wrote on June 14, 1860, "It is ruinous to our schools to have strangers every year."²⁷

The schools were annually faced with an epidemic of some variety. Diseases of various kinds thrived in the Indian Territory where the climate was "liable to sudden changes, and rapid succession of great extremes of heat and cold."²⁸ Typhoid fever was a frequent visitor. During the autumn of 1853, ". . . the institution [Spencer Academy] was severely tried by sickness, and as many as four of the pupils have been removed by death."²⁹ Mr. Hobbs of Lenox wrote on May 18, 1860, "We have had sixty cases of measles within the last five weeks."³⁰

In addition to the problems of a teacher shortage and epidemics, the schools faced the problems of occasional truancy, gossip, recalcitrance, and internal dissension.³¹

NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOLS

In discussing the subject of Mission Schools, mention must also be made of the common or neighborhood church schools. These units were integral parts of the system for public instruction among the Choctaws and the Chickasaws. The schools enrolled "day scholars" only, and were invariably located near the church in a particular district. The missionary wives frequently served as teachers, although some Indians also taught. The Indian Agents

²⁷ Mission Reports, Box 12, I, p. 117.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

²⁹ Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions, *Annual Report*, May 1854, p. 18.

³⁰ Mission Reports, Box 12, I, p. 106.

³¹ Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions, *Annual Report*, May 1855, p. 18.

were favorably impressed with the accomplishments of the neighborhood schools.³²

MISSION SCHOOL INFLUENCE

The various schools exerted a good influence upon the Choctaws and the Chickasaws. A developed mind, capable of exercising sound judgment, was the acquisition of the average student who absorbed a normal proportion of that which the schools offered. A moral stability, fostered by Christian instruction, is not to be minimized even if it be judged upon a basis of pragmatic principle.

The schools encouraged habits of industry by precept and example. These habits reaped benefits for the Indian in his economic life. It is likely that the Indian Agent could report an increase of cotton and of wheat production in the Choctaw district in 1854 because of better husbandry sponsored by the schools.³³

The Reverend S. L. Hobbs of Lenox Mission spoke of the improved conditions of the Choctaws in 1859. He wrote, "We are happy to see the general improvement of our people in their houses, apparel, and working utensils. Six years ago there was but one wagon in the settlement [Lenox]; now there are fourteen, and oxen to work them."³⁴ The schools must be given at least some credit for an improved economic condition. Dr. Ernest Trice Thompson said that ". . . . from the church and school there came a stream of ministers, physicians, legislators, judges, lawyers and teachers to serve their nation."³⁵

The schools also aided the Church. The Christian atmosphere and environment present at the schools made the students more susceptible to the message of the missionary. It was the original policy of the mission boards that the schools should, among other things, serve as a "feeder" for the Church. Neither the leaders of the Indian Councils nor the U. S. officials in the Indian Office objected to the frankly prejudiced educational policy of the Presbyterian Board, which is summarized in an utterance of the Reverend James B. Ramsey, Superintendent of Spencer Academy, who said in a report of 1846 to the Indian Agent:³⁶

"We look forward to the time when Spencer Academy will furnish a thorough English and classical education to Choctaw youth—such as will fit them for eminent usefulness. In the training of these youth, we shall ever aim, as the very highest point of education, to imbue their minds with sound religious principles. To this end, the facts and doctrines of the Bible shall be industriously taught to every pupil; and every means used, also, to form him to correct manners and industrious habits.

³² *Indian Affairs*, 1858, p. 558.

³³ *Indian Affairs*, 1854, p. 136.

³⁴ *Indian Affairs*, 1859, p. 574.

³⁵ Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

³⁶ *Indian Affairs*, 1846, p. 352.

CONCLUSION

The educational program of the Presbyterian missionaries was notably successful. However, the unsettled conditions in the Indian Territory due to the War between the States made all kinds of mission work exceedingly difficult. The schools were forced to close because most of the teachers returned to the North during the summer of 1861. Some of the schools were reopened under the supervision of the Presbyterian boards shortly after the war.³⁷

³⁷ For an excellent treatment of this subject consult Natalie Morrison Denison, "Missions and Missionaries of the Presbyterian Church, U.S., Among the Choctaws, 1866-1907," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Volume XXIV, No. 4 (Winter, 1946-47), pp. 426-448.