FIRST NATIONAL INDIAN SCHOOL:
THE CHOCTAW ACADEMY

By Ethel McMillan

After some research in the library of the Oklahoma Historical Society which had led to the realization that the first school for Indian boys beyond the elementary level was located in Scott County, Kentucky, near Georgetown, further interest led to the library of the University of Kentucky. Here data of such value was found concerning this early venture in education that an effort was made to locate the site of the school.*

Following with care the directions gathered, the way led through that ideal farming area of Central Kentucky over roads first built soon after the War of Independence as macadamized pikes, today as modernized highways, they are still bordered by those self-same sturdy stone fences now bedecked by lichen and moss but intact. Soon the gateway of a rolling blue grass pasture was reached and there on a not distant rise stood one of the five original buildings which had housed the Choctaw Academy. Not far away was another, both of which were constructed of limestone with heavy oak window frames, shutters, flooring, and doors under good wooden shingle roofs.

Just this side the second structure had stood the two-story brick house around which the school had centered, its fireplace still standing and its foundation now doing service for a modern frame house. Above on the left the land rises and there until a few years ago were evidences of where had stood the other two stone buildings which completed the housing of the Academy.

The writer wishes to express her gratitude and acknowledgment for the assistance furnished by the University of Kentucky from first enquiry through the search for materials, and making possible the visit to the site escorted by Ezra L. Gillis, Director of the Department of Source Materials. Courtesies were far beyond that which could have been expected, even to supplying a camera.

Acknowledgment is also due Horace G. Gaines, son of the family who owns the Kentucky farm where the Academy site is located. He pointed out the location of the buildings no longer standing, took the pictures, and otherwise extended every consideration.

The original letter bearing the signatures of Thomas Henderson and Richard M. Johnson, used as an illustration in this article, is a part of the Choctaw Indian collection and library belonging to Mr. Lee F. Harkins, of Tulsa. Much appreciation and thanks are given Mr. Harkins for his interest and kindness in the loan of this rare original item.

In the compilation of this article, the writer wishes to acknowledge, also, the history of this famous Indian school (listing the names of many Indian students there who became leaders in the Indian Territory) in Carolyn Thomas Foreman's interesting contributions, "The Choctaw Academy," published in Chronicles of Oklahoma, Vols. VI (No. 4), IX (No. 4), and X (No. 1).
Nearby was found the land-mark so often mentioned in references to the school and known as the "Blue Spring." And blue it is as it rises out of the depths and fills a wide quiet pool, well walled with steps leading down from two sides. A clear stream, also deep blue, issues and finds its ways among over-hanging trees through a pasture typical of this far-famed region where quiet cattle graze, oblivious of the fact that more than a century ago hundreds of Choctaw and other Indian lads, from that faraway section later known as the Deep South, roamed the same area even as they, and drank from the same blue stream between lessons given by an excellent school master, unaware that for many of them this environment was to determine their careers as leaders among their own people with recognition in affairs of state. All of which was to directly influence the culture of the State of Oklahoma.

After having returned to the highway, or pike, close by near a settlement known as Great Crossings, a comfortably placed Baptist church, built well of brick and cared for with due respect, made one consider whether this might not have been the very building in which these youths worshipped, for they did attend church each Sunday and their school was sponsored by the Baptist churches of Central Kentucky, known as the Elkhorn Association, as well as by the national Baptist group.

And why had the name Great Crossings been applied to this well-to-do neighborhood? In the accounts read, one had observed with curiosity that Choctaw Academy was located near a place of this strange name. It must be noted that to Kentucky came the first settlers who had the hardihood to break through the eastern mountains and that this well favored region was the game preserve of those who had held the prior claim. Hence wild game was abundant, so much so that the buffalo roamed through at will and made a roadway, or trace, in their migrations from the far south north of the Ohio River, which at this point crossed a branch of the Elkhorn River. It was indeed Great Crossings for the vast herds that had passed as well as for the youths just come.

But whence came this school? What purpose did it serve? Of these questions the first pressed hardest for answer.

A great wave of religious enthusiasm rolled over this section of Kentucky soon after the arrival of the first settlers, for these earnest people sensed that their young folks must be saved from the infidelity being rapidly spread by the then prevailing influence of the French who had recently so gallantly come to our aid in the War for Independence. From 1790 to 1801 this fervor increased until it culminated in great revival meetings. As a result ardent interest

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1 This spring is said from earliest references to be bottomless. Reliable information states that during a recent drought (1947) from this source came the water supply for nearby Georgetown.
spread not only to our own people on the rapidly expanding frontier, for they were in need of religious direction, but to the Indians; for now that British influence among them was no longer supreme, concern for their welfare arose. By 1800, the Baptist church was ready to assume obligations not only for sending missionaries to the frontier but to the Indians. The Elkhorn Association made up of all the Baptist churches of the Great Crossings area led in the movement. A few years later the stimulating influence of Luther Rice, a great missionary leader recently returned from India where he had labored in association with the renowned Adoniram Judson, so inspired them that they influenced the Board of Directors of the Kentucky Baptist Society to write to the various government agents among the Indians suggesting that the English language be introduced in preparation for the teachings of Christ and that they use their influence to have some of the Indians send their children among the whites to be schooled.3

As a result of this invitation by 1818 at Great Crossings in the home of Colonel Richard M. Johnson, an Indian school was in progress. By the next May the Western Monitor, issue of May 18, 1819, states that, "The Baptist Missionary Society meeting which was scheduled to meet at Frankfort on the 2nd, has been postponed to the thirty-first at the home of Colonel Richard M. Johnson, when the young Indians will undergo an examination."3

Meanwhile a second invitation had been extended through the Indian Agents to parents to send their children to this region for instruction.

The movement spread as is evidenced by the Baptist Association of Missouri having presented a petition in December of 1818 to the House of Representatives making known their desire to assist in schooling the Indians and requesting "Aid and assistance." 3

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3 "In 1816 the Board of Directors of the Kentucky Baptist Society for propagating the gospel among the heathen . . . wrote a circular letter to the Indian Agents suggesting the introduction of the English Language among the Indians and so far as practicable habits of civilization as preparation for spreading the gospel among them."—Leland Winfield Myer, The Life and Times of Colonel Richard M. Johnson (Columbia University Press, 1932), p. 346.

"The Baptist Church . . . at Great Crossings, Scott Co., Ky, was organized on . . . May 28, 29, 1785, seven years before Kentucky was admitted into the Union as a State, while it was yet a part of Fincastle County, Va."

"At a church meeting held at the Big Crossing on Saturday and Sunday, the 28th and 29th of May, 1785, present Brethren Lewis Craig, John Taylor, Richard Young, Samuel Deadmon, as helps called for, who proceeded to constitute the following members into a church, to be called the Church at the Great Crossing, when the Philadelphia confession of faith was adopted; Wm. Cave, James Suggett, Sr., Robert Johnson, Thomas Ficklin, John Suggett, Julius Gibb, Robert Bradley, Bartlett Collins, Jemima Johnson, Susanna Cave, Sarah Shipp, Caty Herndon (or Bohannon), Jane Herndon, Hannah Bradley, Betsy Leeman, Betsy Collins."—J. N. Bradley, History of the Great Crossings Baptist Church (Georgetown, Ky., 1925), pp. 7-8.

3 Ibid., p. 352.
In the following February Colonel Johnson, now a Representative in Congress from Kentucky, likewise presented a petition from the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions under direction of the General Convention of the Baptist Denomination of the United States expressing their intention of establishing schools for the Indians and praying for encouragement and financial aid. Further influence was likewise exerted by the missionaries themselves which resulted in its being stipulated in treaties between several tribes and the federal government that generous portions of their annuities should be set aside for the education of their children in mission schools. The most notable of these was that of the Choctaws concluded on January 26, 1825. This provided that the President should apply annually for a term of twenty years six thousand dollars from their annuities for the education of their children. Soon thereafter "the chiefs requested to have this applied at some point 'distant from the nation'.” To this desire the War Department acceded.4

As a result of this agreement, the Choctaw chiefs and other leaders of their nation at once requested their agent, William Ward, to seek the aid of some missionary society in the education of their children at a place distant from the nation, for in competition with the white man they had concluded that survival depended on becoming learned in his wisdom. That same judgment made them know this would be most readily achieved by sending their ablest sons to live in their midst, be schooled in their knowledge and become proficient in its application.

Letters were written to Jacob Creath, head of the Baptist Missionary Society of Kentucky and to Colonel Richard M. Johnson who had already made a beginning in establishing such a school. Colonel Johnson replied offering for a certain sum "to receive and educate on his Blue Spring farm near Great Crossings in Scott County, Kentucky, such boys as the Indians (Choctaws) might send." After due consideration of this offer by the War Department and the acceptance of a plan for the school from the Baptist Board of the General Convention, an agreement was reached and William Ward, their agent, duly authorized to see that a certain number of boys

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4 "At the beginning of the 19th Century discouragement from warfare with the whites had brought the realization that the only way to compete with them and survive was to become learned in their wisdom. So in the treaties educational provisions began to appear."—Mrs. Shelly D. Rouse, "Colonel Dick Johnson’s Choctaw Academy, a Forgotten Educational Experiment," *Ohio Archeological and Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XXV, No. 1, 1916, Columbus, p. 88.

were chosen and arrangements made for their being escorted to the appointed place.  

In Colonel Johnson's correspondence is a letter in which he referred to the spacious buildings in which the boys would live and work and stated that their arrival was expected on October 15, 1825.  

Thus the Choctaw Academy came into being, for though later representatives from other tribes were in attendance, it was essentially a school of the Choctaw Nation, fittingly bearing that name, and when their support was withdrawn it ceased to exist.

Colonel Richard Mentor Johnson was one of the sons of Robert Johnson and Jemima Suggett Johnson who migrated from Orange County, Virginia to Kentucky in 1779-80. The parents came as far as Wheeling on the Ohio River and were delayed until severe winter passed and they were able to travel by water to the site of Louisville. Here Richard M. was born in 1780 while his father was north of the Ohio with General George Rogers Clark helping to subdue the Indians. On the return the family moved to Bryant Station in Central Kentucky which was a stronghold for early settlers who were willing to risk much for a chance to live in this highly desirable region. Here the mother with her five children went through the siege when for days the Indians in large numbers lay in wait for their certain surrender; for the water supply, an ample spring, was outside the stockade and food stores were nearly exhausted.

8 "The Baptist Board of Missions was another valuable ally. The Baptists had been pioneers of religion in Kentucky; shepherded by men of ardent piety, untiring zeal, indomitable energy of character and vigorous and well balanced intellects, in every way fitted to the then state of society in a wilderness beset with every danger and privation, they were the first ministers to the brave, daring and noble spirits who settled and subdued this country... Therefore, it was deemed good policy to put this popular denomination in charge of the new venture. The names of the School Board and the Board of Visitors which it appointed are mentioned in many of the histories of the times... All were conscientious men of position and of sturdy life and principle from Dr. Staughton, Secretary of the Baptist Board at Washington, to James F. Robinson, a governor of the state—men of rugged individualities."—Rouse, op. cit., p. 91.


"He writes that there are five buildings—the first he describes as '... The Academy a two story stone house, 44 feet long and 24 wide, divided into four equal rooms, two above stairs and two below stairs....' mentions the good fireplaces and the four windows of twenty lights in each room and adds that the rooms would accommodate from 100 to 120 students.

"There is one frame house, situated near the academy, with a good garden and outhouses, suitable for a family. There is a large three story house, situated near the academy, thirty feet long and twenty wide, with two fire places, and a good Franklin stove, well calculated for the dining and lodging rooms.'

"He describes two other stone houses, two stories in height which were used for lodging pupils and states that: '... All of the aforesaid houses are well plastered and finished off in good style and most admirably constructed for comfort and convenience.'"
When there was no more water this mother proposed that each woman with buckets walk out to the spring, fill them and return, counting on the chivalry of the enemy not to molest them. It was agreed and led by the person who a few months before had borne the babe who became Colonel Richard M. Johnson, the daring deed was accomplished. The Indians under the spell of admiration for such heroism that night quietly withdrew. Soon it was deemed safe to go to their own lands and this family established themselves at what was even then known as Great Crossings in the heart of what is today spoken of as the Bluegrass.

Robert Johnson early showed himself to be a man of ability worthy of confidence. Very soon after settling on his own farm he turned its cultivation over to a responsible person and answered the demand to survey the neighboring areas now being rapidly organized into counties with boundaries to be defined, town sites to be laid out, farms to be located and road lines to be run. This gave opportunity for acquaintance with and selection of choice portions of land for himself and assured ownership. Thereby the foundation of the family fortune was laid. Meanwhile a highly respected place in the esteem of the countryside had been attained and Robert Johnson had become a leader in religion and in education, also chosen to represent his people in the state legislature.

In such a setting Richard M. Johnson grew up surrounded by the best advantages that a rich land occupied by a well endowed, determined people could offer. Transylvania University in nearby Lexington gave him unusual advantages for a community so recently transplanted. Further opportunities opened and soon admission to the practice of law was had. In rapid succession came political preferment as representative in the state legislature and as congressman.

While in Washington declaration of the Second War for Independence brought the decision to volunteer to raise a regiment and offer himself for service in the Northwest. This resulted in his becoming the hero of the Battle of the Thames for he was credited, though not without dispute, with killing Tecumseh, the Indian chieftan and prophet whose loss ended the resistance of the Indians of the Northwest. Kentucky responded by making him its idol and extending the office of U.S. Senator without opposition. The next step was that of the vice presidency under Van Buren. But Colonel Johnson's great ambition for the presidency was not to be attained.

Yet these preferments with the resulting opportunities were not the source of his greatest contribution but rather his acceptance of the offer to take over the responsibility for the education of the Choc-
taw Indian youth. For this cause early environment had given special understanding and vital interest, for he had experienced with his father and an older brother James as leaders in Great Crossings church the awakening in missions and the development of the movement under the influence of the able leaders of that day. Concern for this movement had been kept alive through the years so that when William Ward with the authority of the War Department made the offer there was but one answer.

The vision of the zealous pioneer ministers and that of their ardent followers, the co-operation of the Indian leaders, the underwriting of the United States Government, and the faith of the lads themselves would have come to naught had Richard M. Johnson been less right in the choice of the teacher who was to bring to a culmination that which had been wisely undertaken and followed through unfalteringly. Into whose hands was to fall this ultimate responsibility? Herein was to be answered our third question: What purpose did the school serve?

It is quite likely that the selection of the master for this school had been made before the acceptance of the superintendency for that person was none other than Thomas Henderson, for the ten years now closing pastor of the Great Crossings Baptist Church, whose numer-

9 "Colonel Johnson with his brother James was now suffering financial distress, for on learning that the government was sponsoring an exploration of the Yellowstone country and the Missouri River they had agreed to furnish steamboats and provisions for the expedition; serious losses resulted."—(Klyde H. Young and Lamar Middleton, Heirs Apparent, New York, 1948, p. 115.) This furnished another reason for sponsoring the Academy in that there was a chance for remuneration.

10 On October 28, 1825, Colonel Johnson wrote to Thomas L. McKenney, Superintendent of Indian Affairs: "The nation of Choctaws determined on this measure, without any solicitation on my part, and without my knowledge: but since they have determined to send their children here, I feel a deep interest for them." The Kentucky Gazette of November 4, 1825 mentioned the Choctaw Academy in these words: "We are informed that the chief men of the Choctaw Nation have sent to the care of Colonel Richard M. Johnson, twenty-one youths, to be educated. We also understand that very good arrangements have been made to accommodate them—and the object is to manage them in every respect as if they were the sons of respectable farmers—they are to be taught by the Rev. Thomas Henderson who it is believed possesses high qualifications to manage them, and to prepare some of the most promising to graduate in Transylvania University."

A Georgetown paper of November 4th, carried the following notice: "We have been informed that twenty one Indian children, from the Choctaw Nation have just arrived at the Blue Spring, the residence of Col. R. M. Johnson for the purpose of receiving an education. Notwithstanding there are at the same time sixteen or eighteen Missionary establishments in the Nation, yet after a consultation with Agt. Col. Wm. Ward, formerly of this county, the parents of these children preferred sending them to the Blue Springs, a position in every way calculated to promote their comfort and happiness; both from the locality, convenience and house room, and the deep interest which Col. Johnson has ever taken to ameliorate their condition, together with that of the oppressed and illiterate of every country. The Rev. Thos. Henderson who is well fitted for the task from his learning, piety, and industry is to be the teacher of the school. Those who feel a missionary spirit will find a field at home for their munificence."—Myer, op. cit., p. 361.
ous abilities, admirable qualities of character, and unfailing common
sense had been well sounded. Upon him was to devolve not only
instruction but for long periods administration, since Colonel John-
son's duties in Washington permitted nothing less. So with as-
surance we find the newly chosen superintendent writing to the
Secretary of War: "I have engaged a man of uncommon merit . . . a
preacher of the gospel, eminent for his literary talents and
attainments and his amiable disposition; a man of business, in-
dustrious in his habits, dignified in his deportment, and conciliatory
in his manners." 

Certainty of teaching ability above the common-
place was also expressed elsewhere.

The fact that Thomas Henderson surveyed part of the territory
of Missouri for the government as well as contributed to such needs
in the growing settlement of Cincinnati indicates that he may have
come west as a surveyor from his home in Albermarle County, Vir-
ginia, where he had been liberally educated.

Evidence of his integrity as a young man is shown by the terms
of the will of John White, also of Albermarle County, who therein
provided for the freedom of his slaves and their colonization on land
in Kentucky; this provision to be carried out by Thomas Henderson,
who fulfilled the trust by purchasing two hundred acres of land
along Green River, deeding it to the freedmen and their increase
and seeing that they were settled thereon.

So, it was a man of proven worth who was to take over the
experiment. In October, 1825, twenty-one Choctaw boys carefully
chosen from the mission schools, all still east of the Mississippi River,
arrived at Blue Spring farm to find buildings ready, furnishings
completed, text books selected, courses of study planned, regulations
made in detail from food to articles of clothing, servants agog, and
school master profoundly moved in contemplation of the serious
obligation; for not only were the abilities of these youths to be
developed and their usefulness assured but meanwhile the Office of
Indian affairs of the War Department, the Board of Baptist Mis-

11 Rouse, op. cit., p. 92.
sions, the chiefs, the parents, and Colonel Johnson were to be satis-
fied, as well as the committee of examiners.\textsuperscript{12}

Orders from Washington declared that school should open at
sunrise and continue till sunset with only Saturday afternoon off for
care of rooms and clothing and writing home. Sunday was devoted
to Bible study and devotions, fortunately the opportunities of the
well established church were at hand. Thomas Henderson spent the
evenings in his own home directing the older boys for two hours in
the study of astronomy, book-keeping, and surveying. Singing
societies, a band and a Napoleon Society were organized. The latter
for the purpose of learning the manners and customs of polite society.
After a few years it was apparent that shops for instruction in
black-smithing, shoe-making, wagon-making and tailoring should be
introduced; for as the school grew it became the more evident that
not all would become professional men, also that their people were
more and more needing knowledge in skilled labor.

As an increasing need for more teachers arose the authorities
in Washington sent down an expert in inaugurating the Lancasterian
plan recently originated in Lancaster, England, whereby the older
boys were to teach the younger. After due experiment it became
evident that the adult teacher could not be thus replaced. The
forward look of Mr. Henderson and his good judgment is shown by
this making use of the now common practice of taking youth to
summer camp. For recreation and widened experience they for
two weeks in summer repaired to not far off Sulphur Spring, which

\textsuperscript{12} The clothing of the students was a uniform of mixed dark-grey and of blue
and white and is thus described in instructions:

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{lcc}
1 Frock or rifle coat woolen cloth & $12.00 \\
Coat (summer) of colored domestic cotton & 4.00 \\
2 Pair woolen pantaloons to correspond with coat & 8.00 \\
2 Pair cotton pantaloons for summer coat & 5.00 \\
4 shirts & 4.00 \\
2 pair shoes or Moccasins & 4.00 \\
4 Neck handkerchiefs & 1.50 \\
1 Black Leather Stock & .50 \\
2 Pair Woolen stockings for winter & .50 \\
1 Hat for dress wear & 2.50 \\
1 Cap of linen or cloth for common wear & .50 \\
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Total & $42.50 \\
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

The books used were Emerson’s Readers, Pike’s Arithmetic, Kirkham’s
Grammar, the American Spelling Books, Olney’s Geography, Tytler’s History, Blake’s
Philosophy, Colburn’s Algebra and Gibson’s Surveying.”—Rouse, op. cit., p. 92.
later became a watering place of note as well as for a time the situation of the school when the wood supply failed. Further evidence of aggressiveness is shown in the use of the modern day practice of a self-governing system then known as the Lycurgus Court, wherein the use of the grand jury and court plan of procedure was used. Its success further attests the marked ability of the instructor. As the good work progressed more and more boys came, not only the full quota from the Choctaw Nation, but other tribes pressed for privileges until at times two hundred were in attendance.

Chiefs of the tribes and visitors of national distinction, among them President Van Buren and General Cass, came to find what more than satisfied their expectations—young men schooled in the classics and other skilled in the manual arts. The day for examinations by the Committee of the Board of Missions was often made a gathering time for the community far and wide and great were the commendations. These were often held in the grove where the visit of the Marquis de Lafayette, on his American tour, was celebrated the year the school opened.

The great blow came when the scourge of cholera swept the country in the summer of 1833. Fortunately Colonel Johnson was present, for Thomas Henderson went down early in the onset. Had anyone previously doubted the interest of the superintendent and his ability to stand by when school master, students, and faithful slaves were stricken, this occasion would have proven otherwise. Physicians and all others assisting were amazed at his fortitude and skill. In spite of all that was done seventeen boys were sacrificed. There is evidence on the farm today of where they were laid to rest, their graves carefully marked with native limestone.

During the twenty years of the Academy’s activity young men who became lawyers, physicians, ministers, teachers, translators, artisans—all understanding the white man and learned in his wisdom—returned to their people as bearers of good will ready for leadership in solving the problems pressing for attention.¹³

Then why did Choctaw Academy pass? Immediately comes the answer that removal of the Choctaws and other Indian tribes from the East to their own territory, meant the re-establishment of the mission schools and their natural outgrowth in Armstrong, Spencer and other notable schools in the Indian Territory which made this honored institution unnecessary. The thoughtful person will sense a more vital reason on understanding that two years before it closed, its loved master had insisted on release (for strength was failing) and that when no worthy successor was found, Choctaw Academy had served its day.

No, not its day only, for Oklahoma is now its heir, rich in the wisdom brought by these bearers of light which their forefathers saw they could receive only "by being schooled at a distance from home," and handed down first by them and on from father to son into your hands and mine. Thus Thomas Henderson, Richard M. Johnson and their sponsors and co-laborers were benefactors of today's Oklahomans.

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14 "Choctaw Academy . . . . The Chief Patrons of the school were the Choctaw and Chickasaw who sent at tribal expense so many of their promising boys that the school roll amounts almost to an index of the subsequent leaders."—Lester Hargrett, *A Bibliography of Constitutions and Laws of the American Indians*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1947) p. 19, fn.