WHEELOCK MISSION

By Lona Eaton Miller

Wheelock Church, located about one and a half miles northeast of Millerton and about eleven miles north and west of Idabel, in McCurtain County, Oklahoma is the oldest church organization in the Choctaw Nation and the oldest church building in the State. It was organized as a Mission December 9, 1832, by Reverend Alfred Wright. The first structure, a log building was constructed shortly after the arrival of the Choctaws in 1832. The stone church there was built and dedicated in 1846. Since its construction, the school has been destroyed by fire and the church partially wiped out. They were rebuilt, and with the exceptions of a few years the mission work at Wheelock has been continuously carried on. One hundred and five years after its dedication, services are still held in this oldest, Oklahoma church.

Prior to the moving of the Choctaws from Mississippi, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions with headquarters in Boston had established a number of missions among the Choctaws and had made considerable progress in both educational and religious work. Since 1821, under the appointment of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Reverend Alfred Wright had been a missionary to the Choctaws in Mississippi. He chose to continue his work with them after their removal west to the Indian Territory, now Oklahoma.

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1 "Shortly after their arrival in their new home a mission was established and a church organized and named Wheelock Mission, in memory of the first president of Dartmouth College. It is said that the first meeting was held on the 9th day of December, 1832, at which time thirty persons were received into the church from those who had formerly been members of the church in Mississippi, and that seven others were added on profession of faith. The Mission was established by Reverend Alfred Wright, who was a missionary to the Choctaws in Mississippi, and who had continued his work amongst the Choctaws in their new home after it had been interrupted in Mississippi, occasioned by the preparations for their removal."—Allen Wright, "Wheelock Seminary," Chronicles of Oklahoma, Vol. I, No. 2 (October, 1921), pp. 117-20. (The writer of this article cited lives at McAlester, Oklahoma, where he has had his law office and resided for more than fifty years. He is Allen Wright, Jr., a son of the late Principal Chief Allen Wright of the Choctaw Nation—see fn. 16 following.—Ed).

2 Letter received from Mrs. Leila Black, Principal of Wheelock Academy, dated July 9, 1951, Millerton, Oklahoma.
True to the spirit of the new West, Jackson would push the “Red people” further back, exchanging new promises for broken ones. Following the conclusion of the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek in September, 1830, the Choctaws immigrated to their new home west of the Mississippi, during the years of 1831, 1832, and 1833. For accomplishing the removal, bands or companies were organized, each known by the name of its leader or head man.

In the early part of the year 1832, the band or company known as the Thomas LaFlore Company comprising about six hundred persons settled in what is now McCurtain County, Oklahoma. Shortly after arriving in their new home, a mission was established and a church organized, December 9, 1832. It was named Wheelock Mission, in memory of Eleazer Wheelock, the first president of Dartmouth College, and a former pastor and good friend of Reverend Alfred Wright.

To better understand the impressive work attendant to organizing a mission over a century ago, it is important to have a knowledge and understanding of conditions at the time, and of the character and educational preparation of the man accomplishing the feat.

Alfred Wright was born at Columbia, Connecticut, March 1, 1788. He was graduated from Williams College in the year 1812, and from Andover Seminary in 1814. In 1815 he went to North Carolina, and for three years resided in Raleigh. At Charlestown, on December 17, 1819, Wright was ordained an evangelist. It was shortly after his ordination as an evangelist that he received an appointment from the American Board to become a missionary to the Choctaws. He returned to New England in 1820. From there he went to Goshen, a mission in Mississippi where he was stationed until August 1, 1823.

He returned in 1825 to what was then spoken of as “civilization,” to marry Harriet Bunce and bring her with him to the Choctaws, who so greatly needed the home-making ways and the housewifely arts of a woman like her.

Harriet Bunce was born in Weathersfield, Connecticut, July 19, 1779, the daughter of Captain Jared and Lydia (Pettyplace) Bunce. Harriet was ten months old when her mother died, leaving her to the care of her sisters. After the marriage of her elder sister in 1814, to the Reverend Dr. B. M. Palmer, Harriet made her home with them in South Carolina.

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3 “Indian Removal: True to the spirit of the West, Jackson would push the Red people further back, exchanging new promises for broken ones.”—Marquis James, Andrew Jackson, Portrait of a President (New York, 1937), p. 218.

Harriet was a teacher of unusual ability and influence, who had taught children and young ladies in Charlestown, South Carolina, with remarkable success. Of great intelligence, and well educated for the early years of the nineteenth century when a slight knowledge of music and painting and household arts were all that any woman, regardless of her intelligence, was expected to learn. She was possessed with qualities to endure and withstand the hardships of life in the early day missions.

While making her home with her sister and brother-in-law, in Charlestown, South Carolina, Harriet Bunce established the first Sunday School ever assembled there, thus at an early age her executive ability and a love for teaching were manifested. By her residence in Charleston, she had become familiar with southern culture and had added it to her New England culture, an advantage invaluable when teaching later. It was to Mississippi as a bride, that she went to work together with her husband in the mission field.

Missionary operations in Mississippi were interrupted by preparations for the removal of the Choctaws across the river to Indian Territory. Because its missions east of the Mississippi had to be discontinued, the American Board in Boston was undecided about the advisability of future efforts. In October 27, 1830, Wright again visited New England, remaining there until 1831.

Be it ever to the glory of the Choctaws, the decision was determined by them. While on the March, and from their location west of Arkansas and north of the Red River, many messages were sent to missionary friends. They sent dispatches telling of their great need for the missionaries. How could they reopen their schools without missionary teachers, how could they lay out new farms without advice from the mission farmers, how could they combat cholera and fever without the missionary’s medicine kit? Because of the uncertainty of Indian Affairs, the American Board could promise very little, but the missionaries heeded the voice of friends in dire need, calling them.

Alfred Wright went to Little Rock, Arkansas, February 18, 1832. Low waters in the rivers, the theft of two horses and the serious illness of Alfred delayed the journey for several months. Alfred suffered from an incurable heart disease, but he and Harriet had responded to a call which hardships and sickness failed to falter. They joined the Choctaws west of the Mississippi and journeyed with them to the site of Wheelock Mission. There he remained until his death, March 31, 1853. He was succeeded by the Reverend John Edwards who was in charge from 1853-1859.

Coming with a company of Choctaws, Alfred Wright and his friends crossed the Arkansas line into the Choctaw Nation, in 1832.

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5 Grant Foreman, *The Five Civilized Tribes* (Norman, 1934), pp. 78, 80.
Soon they began looking for a desirable place to stop. With them as all pioneer peoples, a source for obtaining water was a major consideration in the selection of a home site. A location near Little River, eighteen miles east of Fort Towson was selected. On a hill where Wheelock Academy now stands west of a little creek, tents were pitched. Along the creek bank cedar trees and holly were growing but best of all there was a spring. A small cabin for a temporary residence was erected. Very soon government employees and experienced workmen came, and with the assistance of the Indians began the erection of buildings for shelter, school and worship. It was a very new land to which the Choctaws had been removed, and it took many years to make the necessary adjustments.

In his long association with the Choctaws, Alfred Wright learned to speak the language and also learned the need of Christian education for them. Educating the Indians, bringing them nearer to civilized life, enabling them to assimilate the speech, industrial life, family organization, social manners and customs, civil government and ethical standards of the white people was the objective he set for his life's work. Until his death he faithfully held to this course.

It was in the first completed log building the organization of the church December 9, 1832 was established, when thirty persons were received into the church from those who had formerly been members of the church in Mississippi, and seven others were added on confession of faith. All were carefully examined as to their views and character.6

In its initial stages, the Mission was solely a religious organization but very shortly after its founding, in the early part of 1833, a school was instituted as a component part of the Mission—a day school for Indian children.

The sympathetic nature and understanding heart of Harriet Bunce Wright were always in tune with the emotional disturbances and sufferings of the Choctaws while trying to become accustomed to their new home. She had great faith in the children of the Choctaw Nation and diligently set forth to meet the challenge of being counselor and teacher to them. In the beginning singing, oratory and penmanship were taught.

Perhaps the response of the Choctaw children to singing inspired Alfred Wright and Williams in 1833 to revise the Choctaw Hymnbook, adding many new hymns, enlarging the collection to 123 hymns;

6 "The church at Wheelock was organized on the second Sabbath in December, including thirty-seven members, seven of whom had not before been connected with any church. All were carefully examined as to their religious views and character."—Missionary Herald, Vol. 28 (1832-1833), p. 464.
which with some supplementary matter, filled 162 pages. There were 3,500 copies of the edition.  

Sickness was one of the impediments to making progress with teaching the children. Stagnant water left by the receding floods of 1833, decaying timber, lack of proper food and nourishment indirectly caused cases of cholera and fever, causing death in almost every family. The stricken children surviving, lost many days in the schoolroom. Harriet Bunce Wright was very ill. It was a period when the mission seemed more like a hospital than a school. It was a common occurrence for from 10 to 15 persons to call at the Wright home for medicine or for treatment. Undiscouraged, the Wrights labored on, and by 1834 the school was well established having an attendance of from 30 to 40 pupils.

Realizing the value of Christian education for their daughters, the Choctaw Council appropriated funds for the Seminary in 1842, and Harriet Bunce Wright, wife of Alfred Wright became its first principal. By 1842, it was exclusively a school for girls. As the school grew, one or more assistants were provided. The following is an intimate description of life in the work of this early school for girls:

"Mrs. Wright's duties as housekeeper at Wheelock were highly complicated. The boarding pupils of the school, the assistants at the mission, and the great number of visitors to whom hospitality must be extended in that region where hotels were unheard of, constituted a large and varying family. And household help, when it was available at all, was undependable; 'pious Irish or German girls from the North' preferred cotton factories near their friends to kitchen work in the Indian Territory.

"Sometimes the Mission employed slaves, hired from their Choctaw owners; but members of the American Board in New England misunderstood and disapproved of this plan.

"Once Harriet Wright voiced her indignation against the disapproval of people who could not know the conditions under which Missionaries worked:"

"'If there are individuals in New England who work as hard as we do, I was so unfortunate as not to find them. My violent illness last winter was caused by dipping 40 dozen candles, and the relapse which brought me so near the grave was occasioned by going out, well wrapped up, to see about the making of soap—It was easier for me to dip candles than to cook, and besides unless well made we could not use them to any profit. The best of dipped candles are"

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1 "A new edition of the Choctaw Hymn-book, consisting of 3,500 copies, has recently been reprinted. The hymns have all been revised by Messrs. Wright and Williams and many new hymns added, enlarging the collection to 125; which with some supplementary matter, fill 162 pages."—Ibid., Vol. 29 (1833), p. 425.

another kind of light to what those enjoy in the Northeast, who can see so well to find fault with us.'

William Armstrong, U. S. Agent for the Choctaws, made the following statement in his report in 1843: "Wheelock is one of the schools now supported from funds appropriated by the General Council—I cannot forbear mentioning the high qualifications of Mrs. Wright as a competent teacher, and as a lady eminently suited to improve the female pupils." 9

Here is another description of Mrs. Wright’s life and contributions as a teacher and missionary at Wheelock: 10

"The course of study provided that five and a half hours daily be given to regular studies—the Bible, Natural Philosophy, geography, English grammar, arithmetic, writing, reading, spelling, composition and drawing. Afternoons were devoted to thorough training in ‘domestic arts’, the necessary duties of a well ordered household, plain and fancy sewing, knitting and the cutting and making of garments.

"In addition to her arduous duties as a teacher and homemaker, Mrs. Wright gave her wholehearted assistance to her husband in his monumental work as author, translator, and collaborator of forty-one published volumes in the Choctaw language. She herself copied his manuscript translation of Joshua, Judges and Ruth for the press. In preparation of another manuscript, she copied the New Testament three times, and all in long hand."

From this institution many fine Choctaw women prominent in their day and time received the first rudiments of their education. Some were sent at the expense of the Choctaw Nation to different colleges of the South and East. Some became teachers.

The following notes give the history of Oklahoma’s oldest church building: 11

"1845. The people of the Wheelock community met and decided to build a stone church that would be a monument to the planting of religion and civilization in the West. The funds for the building were to be obtained by free will offerings of the people in money and labor, and by donations from the members of the Presbyterian Church in the North and East."

"1846. The church was built of stone taken from the ground a few rods south of the building and was completed in 1846. Its site

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was about two hundred yards south of the mission buildings. It stands facing west. There is a door in the northeast corner opening toward the Mission House. High on the east wall, outside, is a tablet bearing the date and Reverend Wright's motto, "Jehovah Jireh"—"The Lord Will Provide."

A large marble tablet inscribed with either a Biblical quotation or a profound statement by Reverend Alfred Wright was placed in a niche located in the east wall back of the pulpit in the church. It was the custom of the missionaries and devout Christians to worship by sitting and studying the wisdom of the inscription. During the years the tablet has disappeared, but there are those who are still hoping it may be found and restored to its original place.

On July 8, 1951, the writer heard a sermon by her pastor, Dr. G. Raymond Campbell, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Oklahoma City, telling about the church and about the training Presbyterian ministers receive, to be able to teach the value of worshipping the Almighty and for attending services for worshipping, and the explanation of the use of symbols and what they represent for creating a feeling of reverence. Later, the writer wondered if the old tablet placed by Alfred Wright could have been a contribution for bringing his people nearer to worshipping God. If so, he succeeded.

Tradition says, "at the west wall of the church, an upper balcony was built for seating the negro slaves for Worship services." In 1846 the church was dedicated, and its stone walls have withstood the wear and tear through the years, including a fire and the War between the States.

Riding horseback, Alfred Wright attended to his duties as a missionary and physician, in which he was often called away. The severe heart attacks to which he was subject necessitated Harriet accompanying him on many of his missions: "Once when he suffered an attack on the open prairie, she piled stones for him that he might dismount from his horse, covered him from the boiling sun with an umbrella, fanned him during the day, and then helped him home when the heat and heart attack abated in the evening."

Reverend Alfred Wright, the beloved friend of the Choctaws and the founder of Wheelock Mission passed away on March 31, 1853. "At his request he was buried in the cemetery a short distance from the church he built and loved. His body lies there today in a small iron enclosure and over the lonely grave is a marble slab placed there by friends and admirers, bearing testimony to him as a man, a Christian, a physician, a translator, and a minister."
Inscription on large marble tablet over the grave of the Reverend Alfred Wright, in Wheelock Mission cemetery.
From the time of the first meeting in the Mission, December 9, 1832, to the time of his death, March 31, 1853, Alfred Wright received nearly six hundred members into Wheelock Church. Following his death, Reverend John Edwards, also from the East, and an assistant named John Libby took charge of the school. After her husband's death, Harriet continued to teach at Wheelock, but in 1854 her health failed and she returned to friends living in the East. She died in Madison, Florida, October 3, 1863, having made her home for several years in the South she had known and loved from early girlhood.

Since its founding Wheelock Mission has been rebuilt, added to, and remodeled. Today it is an attractive institution maintained for orphan Indian girls and is wholly supported from Federal funds.

With the outbreak of the War between the States, the school saw some changes. Reverend John Edwards, successor to Alfred Wright was a Northern sympathizer. In 1861 he was compelled to leave Wheelock, and he went to California. Mr. John Libby, the assistant, though a Union man at heart, had become a slave owner and decided to remain with the Choctaws at the outbreak of the war. For eight years Mr. Libby continued to look after the buildings when the dormitory on the west side of the brook caught fire and sparks carried by a strong northwest wind set fire to the church and school house and all were destroyed. When the day was over nothing remained of the old Mission except the Wright home, a small log house, and the walls of the church.

In the following years the Wright residence was used off and one as a subscription school and "local exhorters would sometimes hold services there." From 1869 until 1882 the place known as Wheelock was little more than a wilderness. The walls of the old stone church with its former history aroused interest in the old Mission, and Wheelock was brought to life again. It was rebuilt in 1882 by Reverend John Edwards when he returned and resumed work among the Choctaws. In the autumn of 1883 assisted by others, he succeeded in re-establishing the Presbytery of Indian Territory. Work was begun at once for rebuilding Wheelock and in the year 1884

16 A young Choctaw ("Kiliabote"), best known by his English name "Allen Wright" bestowed upon him as a lad when entering the neighborhood school at Luk.ahta, was a namesake of the Rev. Alfred Wright who was in charge of the Choctaw Mission field West for the American Board. In 1846, Allen Wright was baptized at the Wheelock Church. He was the Principal Chief of the Choctaw Nation who gave the name Oklahoma for a proposed organization of the Indian Territory in 1866.—Ed.

17 Harriet Bunce Wright was honored almost three quarters of a century after her death, by the Delta Kappa Gamma Society which has for one of its purposes the honoring of women in the history of the teaching profession. In accordance with the Society's custom in this, a figurine (or appropriately dressed doll) representing the honoree was presented in a special program at the National Convention of Delta Kappa Gamma in Chicago, March 27, 1937, during which a poem "Harriet Bunce Wright of Oklahoma" was read in tribute to this splendid teacher, written by Naomi John White, of Stillwater, Oklahoma.
all the buildings were completed and the school reopened. The site chosen for the new buildings was several hundred yards northeast of the old church. Using the same old walls, the church was rebuilt. The Reverend William B. Robe and wife were first in charge after the reopening of Wheelock.

Outstanding in Oklahoma history are the memory and accomplishments of Reverend Alfred Wright who founded Wheelock and of his wife Harriet Bunce Wright who was first principal of Wheelock Seminary for girls in the Choctaw Nation. Upon their shoulders rested many diverse responsibilities. When a church develops from a Mission to survive a period of over a hundred years it is a monument to the staunch and sterling character of the founders. Mr. and Mrs. Wright left comforts and pleasures amid cultural surroundings for the discomforts and sufferings of early day in the great West in order to accomplish the objective of what they chose as their life’s work. Gentle persons having a determination of purpose they journeyed with the Choctaws in wagons drawn by horses or oxen, or on river boats and flat boats. History has recorded the route followed by those making the arduous trip from Mississippi to the line across the Mississippi river, and that many died enroute and were buried where they died. Because of the hardships and sadness experienced, the road traveled is called "Trail of Tears."

In November, 1950, one of the State’s historical markers located on U. S. Highway No. 70, a mile east of Millerton was dedicated at Wheelock Academy just off the highway. It was erected by the Oklahoma Historical Society and the State Highway Commission, and reads: "Wheelock Mission, established by Alfred Wright in 1832, missionary to the Choctaws for 33 years; also physician, and translator of the New Testament and other books into Choctaw. The Choctaw Council established the Seminary for girls in 1842, Harriet B. Wright, Principal. Reverend John Edwards was in charge, 1853-59."

Work at Wheelock Mission is continuing today and has grown. During the 1950-51 school terms there were 127 girls attending the school, not necessarily orphans but those needing such a home. All were boarding school girls rather than day pupils. Reverend Roy Craig, pastor of the Presbyterian church at Idabel, Oklahoma, is also pastor of Wheelock Church.

Were not the lives of the founder and the first principal of Wheelock Mission excellent examples of Paul’s expression of a Christian life as stated in his letter to the Philippian (4:8): "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, if there be any praise, think on these things."

19 Letter from Mrs. Leila Black, op. cit.