

## NOTE ON ABOLITIONISM IN THE CHOCTAW NATION

By *James D. Morrison*

In the midst of the furor which pervaded the United States during the summer of 1850, a fiery editorial was published by a country weekly in a remote corner of the "Cotton Kingdom." The author of the editorial is unknown. The regular editor, Charles DeMorse, often dubbed the "Father of Texas Journalism," was absent at the time from Clarksville, Texas, where his paper, *The Northern Standard*, was printed. The Congressional debate over the Compromise of 1850, which featured Webster's March 7th speech, had waxed hot and heavy and the Nashville Convention, with its threat of secession if Southern rights were not recognized, had just concluded its June session to await the outcome of the Compromise debates in Congress.

Clarksville was only fifteen miles from Red River, the boundary between the State of Texas and the Choctaw Nation. Since the mixed-blood Choctaw planters to the north of the river and the Texas planters to the south both used the Red River as a means of communication with the outside world, since both employed Negro slaves for the cultivation of their plantations and had many other common interests, relations across the River were customarily excellent. But by 1850 the North Texans had begun to be annoyed by a particular development in the Choctaw Nation and the political climate of 1850 presumably caused this annoyance to receive a public airing. Simply stated, the Texans feared that a nest of abolitionists had been planted uncomfortably close to their northern border.

The *Northern Standard* editorialized thus in its issue for June 15, 1850:<sup>1</sup>

We are not opposed to missionaries being sent among the Indians on our border so long as they know and attend solely to their business as such; but we are opposed to the plan of sending avowed abolitionists among them, who are disposed to meddle with the institutions of the south, particularly slavery. It is a well known fact that all the runaway negroes from this part of Texas, always fly to the Nation, and it is equally well known that they receive encouragement and are harbored by reason of the influence of the sentiments propagated by these Reverend Northern gentlemen, and in truth it is with difficulty that a master can regain his slave after he has got among them. If there is any law whereby these gentry can be made to answer for such misdemeanors—well, if not we would say to our citizens, make a law to suit the occasion.

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<sup>1</sup> *Northern Standard*, June 15, 1850. A file of this publication is located in the newspaper collection of the University of Texas, Austin.

This blanket charge of abolitionism, fired against all missionaries to the Choctaws, was resented by *The Choctaw Intelligencer*, a weekly paper published at Doaksville, a community which had grown up near Fort Towson and which at the time was the capital of the Choctaw Nation. One of the editors of the *Intelligencer* was John P. Kingsbury, son of Cyrus Kingsbury. The elder Kingsbury was a missionary, greatly revered by the Choctaw people. The younger Kingsbury wrote a signed editorial in *The Intelligencer* for June 27, 1850, defending the missionaries:<sup>2</sup>

I must confess that I am at a loss in what manner to notice an attack, so uncalled for, on men who have devoted the best part of their lives to the work of missions among this people. The charge is false throughout, and is a libel alike on the good sense of the people of Texas, the Choctaw Nation, and the Northern Missionaries. I believe that it was made in ignorance, and under the influence of excitement; and am confident that it will be unreservedly retracted.

It is not true that there is any plan for sending avowed abolitionists among this or any other Southern tribe. The only societies which send out avowed abolitionists, were organized for the express purpose of breaking down this Mission, and they do not believe it right that a Slaveholding people should have "the benefit of the Clergy." Some who have avowed themselves as abolitionists after their arrival here, have remained but a short time, believing that this people were giving over to hardness of heart.

After thus answering the charge of abolitionism, Kingsbury took up the accusation that the Choctaw Nation furnished a haven for runaway Texas slaves:<sup>3</sup>

It is not true that all the negroes from the neighboring part of Texas fly to the Nation. Two negroes belonging to Mr. R. K. Runnels, of Bowie County, were taken up in Clarksville, broke jail in that place, and were finally secured in Paris. By a parity of reasoning, these slaves evidently thought their chance of escape better in Texas than in the Nation, for the distance to the Nation was much less and the country much more unsettled than that over which they passed. The jailor and citizens of Clarksville and vicinity might be charged with aiding and abetting the escape of those slaves, with just as much propriety as the Choctaw people and the missionaries can be charged with aiding and abetting the escape of slaves because, occasionally, they are able to hide themselves in the swamps and mountains of the Nation. As many, if not more, are found in Arkansas and Missouri than among the Choctaw people. This people do not harbor runaway slaves, and I defy any one to prove to the contrary. Runaway negroes are not such comfortable neighbors as to receive encouragement in lying out. Empty smoke houses and impoverished graneries [*sic*] would be the consequence.

We presume that is very easy to get possession of slaves who escape to the Comanche and Mexican country where the Northern Missionaries have not yet gone.

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<sup>2</sup> *Choctaw Intelligencer*, June 27, 1850. An incomplete file of this frontier newspaper is to be found in the Library of Congress.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

He concluded his editorial with a long tribute to the missionaries, including his father:<sup>4</sup>

Intimately acquainted as I am, with the Missionaries of this Nation, and as the son of one who has spent nigh four and thirty years of his life, in constant, unremitted labor among the Indians, I should have preferred to take no notice of the matter, as it is a true saying, that the best way to kill calumny, is not to run after it. But the position which I occupy, seemed to require of me some notice of the charge, standing as it does in the editorial columns of the *Standard*.

This is not the first false accusation which has been brought against the missionaries of the Nation; but they come not here to obtain a good name—this they had ere they left their homes. In the humble discharge of their duty, they devoted their hearts and their hands to the labor of love among this people, and they cannot see how, "after having put their hands to the plough," they can turn back and mingle in the fierce strife and angry declamations incident to any interference in Political matters. They have something to do. Time does not lie idly on their hands. Numerous calls of the sick, afflicted, and poor; circuits of hundreds of miles, and the care of large schools, leave them hardly time for the social intercourse of the fireside, without looking for runaway slaves. They have not time, even to attend to the spiritual wants of those negroes who stay at home, as they would wish, much less to take upon themselves the looking after runaway negroes. They are the last to hear of runaway slaves, and it is very seldom that they ever hear of them. From my earliest recollection, I know of but one runaway having shown himself at my father's place, and that was in Mississippi. Although there has been some excitement here about a negro supposed to belong to H. A. Runnels, I question if there is one of these "Reverend Northern Gentlemen" who know anything of the circumstances. Right certain I am that the one who lives nearest, say a mile from here, does not know them.

In conclusion I would say that if the gentleman who penned the (to say the least) unwarrantable charge, will pay a short visit to each of the Mission Stations in the Nation, and ride round with the Missionary in his preaching tour, if he is not gratified with his visit, he will at least find that these men have a higher work than to meddle with business which brings trouble, and only trouble, and that continually.

J. P. Kingsbury

This copy of *The Intelligencer* reached Clarksville too late for a reply in the June 29th issue of the *Northern Standard*, but the editor promised, "We will attend to them next week."<sup>5</sup> This promise was fulfilled when the *Standard* appeared the following week. Under the heading, "Choctaw Intelligencer, Missionaries, &c," was a diatribe, heavy with sarcasm, against J. P. Kingsbury. A sample sentence ran: "Here we have lived at one place for the last 10 years, and have never been caught at our rascality till Mr. Kingsbury, associate editor of the *Choctaw Intelligencer*, proves to a demonstration as clear as mud, that we are guilty of libel and base slander."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Northern Standard*, June 29, 1850.

<sup>6</sup> *Northern Standard*, July 6, 1850.

The *Standard* editor refused to retract anything he had charged against the missionaries and continued by naming a specific culprit, using italics for emphasis:<sup>7</sup>

*We have heard Mr. Pitkin, a Choctaw Missionary, express himself in such a manner that there was no mistaking his views. He can say we have heard him express himself as only abolitionists can express themselves. . . . gentlemen who have lived in the Nation for years have informed us that they did not believe there was a single missionary in the Nation but what was an abolitionist in every sense of the word. Mr. Kingsbury asks us to come over and ride around with the Missionary on his preaching tour, but we must beg leave to decline as we can hear better preaching at home. We now bid an eternal adieu to the *Intelligencer* and the Missionaries. We have placed our citizens upon their guard concerning them. . . . Meanwhile Mr. Kingsbury, you can discontinue our exchange.*

The "Mr. Pitkin" mentioned was the teacher, from its beginning, of a boys' school called Norwalk, founded in 1846 by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions nearby and under the same control as Wheelock, a school for girls established some years earlier. Horace W. Pitkin was praised as an excellent teacher by his superintendent, the Reverend Alfred Wright, in the latter's report to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in the fall of 1849.<sup>8</sup> Pitkin was a musician and Wright commended him for the "proficiency made in singing" by his pupils.

Horace Pitkin's musicianship included the ability to repair and tune pianos, a skill which he used during school vacation periods to augment his meager salary as a missionary teacher, not only in the Choctaw country but in northeast Texas as well. The need for tuneful Texas pianos may have prompted another editorial outburst in the *Standard* columns of July 20, which stated:<sup>9</sup>

*The Choctaw Missionary, Mr. Pitkin*

In a previous number we came out and exposed the abolitionism of this gentleman, and further than that we have nothing against him, and as we understand that he is uneasy concerning his personal safety in visiting this part of Texas; we take this occasion to say to him that he is perfectly safe . . . . We think Mr. Pitkin's fears are unfounded, and we promise him that he shall be perfectly safe, whenever he shall see proper to visit us.

We have no fears whatever in visiting the Nation; no more than we ever had, and should feel perfectly safe in Mr. Pitkin's own beat,

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs (1849)*, p. 1141. See also: *The Missionary Herald*, Vol. XLII (1846), p. 213.

<sup>9</sup> *Northern Standard*, July 20, 1850.

and we wish Mr. Pitkin to feel as comfortable as we do . . . . Mr. Pitkin we believe is the only individual in a hundred miles of us who understands the repairing and tuning of pianos, and as most of those instruments in Clarksville need his assistance; we take this occasion to invite him over. Come over Mr. Pitkin. Come over and see us; and bring your friend the younger Kingsbury with you.

Further evidence that the *Standard's* pro tempore editor was receding from his original uncompromising stand with its blanket charges may be drawn from this editorial concerning Ramsay D. Potts, a Baptist missionary, which accompanied the conciliatory remarks concerning Pitkin: "In our remarks in regard to the missionaries being abolitionists we . . . say that the Rev. Ramsay D. Potts, who is a missionary among the Choctaws, is entirely free from the least taint of abolitionism. We believe him to be a gentleman and a Christian."<sup>10</sup>

As might be expected, this battle of newsprint ended with each side claiming victory. Kingsbury wrote in the *Intelligencer* for July 18:<sup>11</sup>

The *Standard* will find us very generous. We always cease firing when the enemy pulls down his flag. The *Standard* never retracts what it says; we always hope to do so when we are wrong. We hear nothing, however, in the *fiddling* of the former to cause us to change the position we assumed in reply to a charge made against the Choctaws and their missionaries.

As to the missionaries, we presume they will try to follow in their poor way the line which their *Glorious Standard Bearer* has marked out to them in his Word, till He shall call them home. The *Standard* might have saved itself the trouble in regard to our exchange, as we had, very fortunately not concluded to exchange.

The final sally by the *Standard* in this exchange was printed on July 20 under the heading, "The Choctaw Missionaries:"<sup>12</sup>

From the very uncourteous and ungentlemanly manner in which we were assailed by Mr. Kingsbury of the *Intelligencer*, we determined to have nothing more to do with the *Intelligencer* or its allies, the Abolition Missionaries; but we have been solicited by many of our most respectable citizens to continue our expose of them. Most of our citizens think we are doing nothing more than our duty in warning the people of Texas in regard to these abolitionists, and have requested us to continue in our course. In doing so we shall have strict regard for the truth, and shall assail no one whose conduct does not deserve it. We shall notice them again whenever they get at all out of their latitude, and we hope in the end to make honest men of them all. So send us the *Intelligencer*, Mr. Kingsbury—let us see what you have to say.

The last item on the matter to appear in the *Intelligencer* consisted of a letter to the editor from a "Choctaw Friend." The

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Choctaw Intelligencer*, July 18, 1850.

<sup>12</sup> *Northern Standard*, July 20, 1850.

letter was printed in the number dated August 1, 1850, with this introduction:<sup>13</sup>

The *Northern Standard* accuses us of assailing it in an uncourteous and ungentlemanly manner. We do not consider ourselves the *assailants*, and we see nothing, save in the caption wherein we can be charged with improper expression. As far as the caption of our first article is concerned we can cheerfully affirm that we did not intend to stigmatize the *Standard* as a scandalous or slanderous paper, though that may seem a natural inference therefrom.

The letter, ending with "I am a Choctaw" and signed "Idea," was a spirited defense of the missionaries. The *Standard*, according to "Idea," was "barking up the wrong tree": the missionaries did not harbor runaway slaves—quite the contrary; their influence was good, although hard put to counteract that of "bad white men" who proposed by foisting various vices, especially drunkenness, upon the Indian people. "It is the Choctaws who ought to complain," he asserted, "for they are the sufferers" from the greed of white men.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps there were other exchanges between the editors concerning the missionaries and their abolitionist leanings. If so, they have escaped notice. The *Intelligencer* ceased publication with the number dated January 7, 1852, because of lack of adequate financial support, while the *Standard* continued to publish for a number of years after the Civil War.

As for the missionaries, it is undoubtedly true that many from New England harbored abolitionist sentiments. It could not have been otherwise. But no evidence has been uncovered that they harbored runaway slaves from Texas or elsewhere or made any attempts to promote the escape of slaves from their legal owners. The American Board, which had sent both Cyrus Kingsbury and Horace W. Pitkin to the Choctaw Nation, became increasingly worried by the attitude of its missionaries there, who not only appeared to condone slavery but often employed slave labor themselves.

In April, 1855, the Choctaw Mission stated its position on slavery to a representative of the American Board, making three points: (1) a missionary should have nothing to do with political questions; (2) while admitting slavery to be wrong, they refused to hold every slave owner as sinful when the institution of slavery was recognized as legal in the United States; and (3) that it was the missionary's duty to explain and illustrate Biblical teachings concerning the relationships of servants and masters.<sup>15</sup> The Board was not satisfied with this policy of the Mis-

<sup>13</sup> *Choctaw Intelligencer*, August 1, 1850.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> W. B. Morrison, "The Choctaw Mission of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions." *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. IV, No. 2.

sion on slavery, which promoted the missionaries to request an end to their relationship with that body in these words:<sup>16</sup>

We are fully convinced that we cannot go with the Board as to the manner in which we as ministers of the Gospel and Missionaries are to deal with slavery. We believe the instruction of the Apostles in relation to this subject are a sufficient guide, and if followed, the best interests of society as well as the church will be secured. We have no wish to give the Board any further trouble on this subject, and as there is no prospect that our views can be brought to harmonize, we must request that our relation to the A.B.C.F.M. be dissolved in a way that will do the least harm to the Board and to our mission.

This was in 1855. The actual dissolution came four years later, December 24, 1859, when the American Board decided finally to relieve itself of "the unceasing embarrassments and perplexities connected with the missions in the Indian Territory." The work was taken over by the Presbyterian Church, Old School, of which most of the missionaries were already members.

Perhaps it is fitting, as the Nation struggles with the problem of intergation, to recall the difficulties of a century ago in Oklahoma as to the proper relationship between white and black.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*