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Choctaws and Missionaries in Mississippi Before 1830

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In the northeastern corner of Winston County, Mississippi rises an oval mound that covers about an acre and is approximately 40 feet in height. Its name is Nanih Waiya, the sacred mound of the Choctaws. Various origin traditions of the tribe center around the mound. According to one story, the great spirit, Hushtahli, created the Choctaw in the center of the mound, and they emerged into the light from its top.[1]

> Old Hopankitubbe (Hopakitobi), . . . was wont to say that after coming forth from the mound, the freshly-made Choctaws were very wet and moist, and that the Great Spirit stacked them along on the rampart, as on a clothes line, so that the sun could dry them.[2]

As if the great spirit had indeed made the Choctaw out of wet earth, the missionaries who first came into their territory to Christianize them felt that they were like malleable clay, ready to be shaped into the likeness of the Christian god and to become good Christians and Americans. However, it soon became obvious that the Choctaws were not ready to be molded to the will of the missionaries. Indeed, the missionaries often found themselves being bent to the will of tribal leaders even as they tried to bring the Choctaws to spiritual salvation. They were drawn into the secular and political concerns of the tribe as much as they were able to bring Christian conversion to tribal members.

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Christianity and civilization went hand in hand as Americans moved out across the frontier. The Protestant Christian ethic of bringing God's will and order into being in this world was a strong incentive to clear and tame the wilderness and make it productive. The rhetoric of westward expansion claimed that Indian use of the land was unproductive, that the Indians raised only a few crops, and that they roamed in small numbers over vast territories that could and should support vastly larger populations.

The role of Christianity on the American frontier was important not only because it endowed attitudes toward the unknown wilderness with intellectual content. It was also important because the church generally represented the only true source of order in the lives of people who had moved beyond the pale of organized community life. Very little governmental regulation or organization existed in the wilderness to enforce law and social order. Churches stood for decency and order, and they brought discipline and stability to groups of people who found disorder and temptation at every turn.[3]

Missionary activity on the American frontier was an important concern of religious groups. In good part it was aimed at serving those church members who were venturing into the wilderness to establish new homes.[4] But concern about making new converts among the Indians was also strong. In 1787, the American Society for Propagating the Gospel Among the Indians and Others in North America, which had existed for twenty-five years as a voluntary organization, was given legal status by an act of the Massachusetts legislature.[5]

The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions was established in 1810 as an interdenominational organization, founded upon the bedrock of New England Presbyterian Calvinism and Congregationalism. It was one of the first and most important of the missionary organizations working with Indian tribes on the frontier. Initially, the American Board directed its efforts to overseas missions since other missionary attempts with the Indians in North America had "been attended with so many discouragements." By 1817, however, the American Board was concerned that if the Indians were not civilized, they would soon become extinct.[6]

The aims and purposes of Christian missionary societies fit quite well with the intent of the federal government to establish

its own sense of civilization and authority on the frontier. It was a simple step for the government to enlist the aid of churches. The Civilization Act that was passed in 1819 was only one of several acts that had, over the years, given financial assistance to churches to promote the civilizing of Indians through education and their conversion to Christianity. Church and state were to work closely together to promote the ends of decency and order in the uncivilized wilderness.[7]

In 1818, the Prudential Committee of the American Board advised the missionary group at Brainard, the establishment among the Cherokees, that "such a disposition should be made as would best serve the purposes of that establishment and promote the object of a similar establishment in the Choctaw Nation." On the advice of the missionaries at Brainard, Cyrus Kingsbury and Mr. and Mrs. Loring S. Williams were deemed best suited for the work to be undertaken.[8] Kingsbury sought the advice of the Choctaw Agent, Colonel John McKee, about an appropriate location for a mission and was advised that a site on the Yalobusha River should be used, and that the government would provide the same support there that it had provided at the Cherokee mission at Brainard.[9]

The missionaries set off on the 400-mile trek over land into the Choctaw country in May of 1818.[10] The country was described as fine, and the Choctaw as possessed of considerable wealth and having strong tendencies toward a civilized state. Their agent, John McKee, was in favor of missionary work and would use his influence with the tribe to support the missionaries' design.[11] Despite the fact that panthers lurked in the woods and roads were difficult to navigate, the missionaries began their work with a positive feeling.[12]

Thus began the long relationship between the Choctaw nation and the American Board of Commissioners, a relationship that was to prove often troubling and frustrating for missionaries and Choctaws alike, but whose impact on the tribe was profound. Kingsbury and other missionaries lived with the Choctaw throughout the difficult period of treaty-making, the ultimate removal of the majority of the tribe to the Indian Territory west of the Mississippi River, and the re-establishment of the nation there. Although the missionaries struggled valiantly to bend the Choctaws to the will of God, they as often as not found themselves submitting to the will and desires of tribal leaders. The

hardships that they suffered in their attempts to tame the wilderness were severe, far more than anything endured by the Choctaw in their settled and peaceful communities. They fell ready prey to illnesses induced by environmental conditions to which their Choctaw neighbors were long accustomed. They suffered for their faith in many ways and were sustained primarily by their belief in their God, and secondarily by the United States government.

Despite the fact that missionaries gave little credence to native beliefs, they did not move into a spiritual vacuum. Although ethnographers have given the Choctaw little credit for religious activities, Calvin Cushman, the son of a missionary who grew up among them and learned the language, described their personal religious beliefs in some detail. One of the earliest records in the journal of the first Choctaw mission also described the beliefs of the Choctaw in spirits who gave them special protection and abilities.[13] Their tribal dances and stickball games had both social and religious connotations.

They also had an inherent suspicion of the *alikchi* and *ishti ahullos,* men who had special spiritual powers and were recognized as healers and clairvoyants. In the long origin story related to Gideon Lincecum by a Choctaw man in the 1830's, the ishti ahullos set themselves up as leaders of the tribe during the migration toward their homeland in Mississippi, but the people resisted their leadership and feared their powers. Although they were held in awe because of their special abilities, people distrusted them because they were different and asserted control over the group. This distrust of people who asserted authority over others might have led the Choctaws to suspect the motives of missionaries, both because they were outsiders and because they claimed religious powers of a special sort.

The Choctaws definitely had their own religious beliefs. And as it turned out, they were not as interested in Christian salvation as they were in education. Christian missionary activity did not replace native beliefs; primarily, it was turned to the purposes of the Choctaws, and that was to remain the case throughout the history of contact between Christian missionaries and Choctaw people. The early relationship between tribal and Christian beliefs was based upon the desire of missionaries to bring salvation to the savages and the desire of Choctaw leaders to learn the ways of white men.

Kingsbury and the Williamses arrived at the site of their new mission station on the Yallobusha River in late June of 1818. The name chosen for the station was Elliot, a tribute to John Elliot, the famous missionary to the Algonquians of the east coast in 1636. There was support from influential full-blood chiefs. Pushmatah and Mushulatubbee wrote to the president saying, "Father, we thank you for the kind assistance you are affording to the Foreign Mission Society in establishing schools among us."[14] In a letter to Samuel Worcester dated July 30, 1818, Kingsbury reported that the reception by the half-breeds and those who understood their object was kind, but he also noted that "there are not wanting those who look upon all white people with a jealous eye."[15]

The work of building the mission and gathering souls proceeded. Kingsbury preached on Sundays to a mixed audience of half-breeds, white people, blacks, and occasionally, some of the natives. And on Sunday, March 26, 1819, after solemn preparation by fasting and prayer, a church was organized at the mission house. However, its members included only the missionaries themselves.[16] No converts had been made yet.

The Choctaws wanted schools, and Kingsbury expressed his frustration over the situation in a letter to Samuel Worcester of the American Board:

> We wish we could say that as much has been done to enlighten & save the souls of these perishing people as to make preparations for the instruction of their children. But, alas, as yet we have been able to accomplish but little towards this most important object. It is impossible for us to express our feelings on this subject. The expectation of this people has been that all our efforts would be directed toward the commencement of a school. . . . [17]

Although the mission was still under construction, the Choctaw were anxious to have the school begin operating. Around the middle of April, eight promising children were presented at the mission by their parents, who had traveled some 160 miles to bring them there. They had heard that the school was ready; it was not, but Kingsbury accepted the children rather than risk alienating their parents and other members of the Nation. On April 19, the first Choctaw school officially opened.[18]

Kingsbury persisted in his efforts to persuade the Choctaw to give up their traditional ways and adopt those of the white man. On August 11, 1819, in a letter addressed to them as "Chiefs, Brothers and Warriors," he said, "You see that you can no longer live by hunting. You must raise corn & cattle & cotton that your women & children may have plenty to eat & to wear."[19]

So that the Choctaws could learn a new way of life, plans were made for three new establishments to be built with government assistance, and local schools in Choctaw communities were contemplated.[20] However, Kingsbury still had occasion to despair of accomplishment. On October 5 he wrote in the mission journal:

> But we know not what to do; we are here in the wilderness more than $12.00 in debt, without money, without the necessary conveniences for a large family, a number of sick to take care of, provisions for 80 or 100 to procure for a year to come, & not a single cable from the Treasurer of the Board for almost eleven months. At times, we feel as tho' we should sink into the grave & no one come forward to raise the smouldering ruins.[21]

Plans for new missions continued despite the physical and financial hardships that had been encountered in establishing the first mission. The Elliot journal for April 4, 1820 recorded a resolution that Mr. Kingsbury go to Ook-tib-be-ha to attend to the concerns of mission establishment there, and on April 6 Kingsbury left Elliot to visit the new post.[22]

The missionary school at Eliot had the support of two important chiefs, Puckshanubbee and Mushulatubbee, full-bloods, who wrote to Dr. Samuel Worcester of the American Board on June 4, 1820. They had visited the school and were impressed with what they saw.

> Brother, our hearts are made glad to see our children improving so fast. We are pleased to see our boys go into the woods with their axes, and into the field with their hoes, under the care of their teacher to learn to work, that they may know how to clear and cultivate our land; for we cannot expect to live any longer by hunting. Our game is gone; and the missionaries tell us, the Good Spirit points out to us now this new and

> better way to get our meat, and provide bread and clothes for ourselves, women and children. And we are very glad to see our daughters learning to cook, and to make and mend clothes, and do all such things as the white women do.[23]

In order to assist the school, the two chiefs announced that they had recently agreed to give the sum of $6,000 per year to the mission from their treaty annuities. Additional support for the school came from an annual appropriation of $1,000 from the Civilization Fund.[24]

The support of another prominent leader, Pushamataha, can be inferred from the fact that his son, a youth of about 15, became a student at the school. It was reported that the young man spoke English fluently and had a good knowledge of grammar and some acquaintance with geography. He had obtained his knowledge from some white men at the trading station at St. Stephens.[25]

In 1820, the government negotiated the Treaty of Doak's Stand with the Choctaws. By the terms of the treaty, the tribe ceded its lands in central Mississippi in exchange for a tract of land west of the Mississippi River. The treaty negotiations gave the missionaries of the American Board an opportunity to seek support from the government for their establishments. Kingsbury laid before Jackson and Hinds an ambitious plan for building schools, explaining that "a large number of the children must be fed and clothed, all must be initiated in habits of industry, and a portion taught the Mechanics Arts." He proposed that in 1821 the government would provide $5,000 for the school at Elliot, $12,000 for construction of a school at Oak-tib-be-ha, and $10,000 for the establishment of five small schools. In the succeeding years through 1828, the missionaries would establish two more major schools, and 28 more small schools in Choctaw communities. The total costs entailed by Kingsbury's plan would be $358,500, or an average of $44,812 per year. The large schools would be boarding schools to serve 80–100 children at an average cost of $15,000 per year, and the small schools would be day schools to serve 20 to 40 children at an average cost of $2,000 per year.[26]

The treaty provided support for education. Article 7 agreed that 54 sections, each one square mile, should be laid out and sold to raise funds for the support of schools—three-fourths designated

for schools in Mississippi and one-fourth for schools to be established in the Arkansas territory.[27]

The missionaries stood to get support, but at the expense of Choctaw lands, and the amount that would be provided by the sale of the 54 sections at the prevailing rate of $1.25 for public lands would be only $43,200, far short of the expenses projected in Kingsbury's grand scheme for the establishment of schools. However, the treaty provision and continuing support from the Civilization Fund gave evidence of the federal government's commitment to education for the Choctaws.

The school at Elliot meanwhile was increasing its enrollment. Kingsbury reported to the Secretary of War that 38 new students had been admitted to the school. The enrollment was 74, of whom six were home on vacation. Fifty of those students had not been able to speak English on their arrival, but all were learning it and some were now fluent in it. Of sixty-five children who began learning the alphabet, twenty-eight now read the New Testament with facility. Ten had made progress in arithmetic, and two students who were considered advanced when they entered had learned some grammar and geography. Also, some fifty thousand bricks had been made, and a number of new buildings had been erected.[28]

A second mission was established on Ook-tib-be-ha Creek in 1820. Kingsbury took up residence there and named the new station Mayhew, in honor of another early missionary.[29] The numbers of the mission family continued to increase, and new leaders came to assist Cyrus Kingsbury. The person who was to have probably the greatest impact of any of the missionaries to the Choctaw, Cyrus Byington, arrived at Elliot in April of 1821.[30]

Byington, who had graduated from Andover Theological Seminary in September of 1819, had been assigned by the Board to raise funds for missionary efforts, and had been asked to accompany the missionary contingent that left Goshen, Massachusetts for the Choctaw missions in 1820.[31] If Kingsbury was the spiritual leader of the Choctaw missions and the man most singularly responsible for their secular concerns of hiring laborers and dealing with the government agents, Byington was the teacher whose influence on the Choctaw was the most lasting. In their respective roles, Kingsbury and Byington represented the conflicts that the missionaries of the American Board faced in dealing with both their spiritual responsibilities and the secular forces of tribal and federal politics.

The Choctaws wanted schools near their homes, and in 1822 Moses Jewell traveled from Elliot to the Six Towns district to follow up on Kingsbury's visit to locate a school. Loring S. Williams went to French Camps, a settlement that had grown up around the tavern/trading post established by the LeFlore family on the Natchez road in the southern part of Choctaw country. The community was primarily one of mixed-bloods. There he established the station that ultimately became known as Bethel.[32]

The importance of the Choctaw language as a means of communicating Christian doctrine to the natives was apparent to the missionaries. Alfred Wright undertook to learn the Choctaw language by going to live with the family of Captain David Folsom at the Pigeon Roost, Folsom's tavern and trading post on the road from Elliot to Mayhew.[33] And the school at Elliot introduced the translation of English words into Choctaw and vice versa into its curriculum.[34]

It was apparent that the mission schools could serve the ends of conversion by educating their students to read and write and understand the Bible, and there were some encouraging signs regarding conversions. The journal at Elliot for February 16, 1822, reported that Tus-eam-i-ub-by and his son visited and expressed an interest in hearing more about Christianity.[35] And every so often, a workman at the mission or a student at the school would appear genuinely concerned or even show the distress of mind that accompanied the question, "what must we do to be saved?" These were occasions of the greatest joy to the missionaries.

But there were also the secular concerns of the schools, and on March 15, 1822, Kingsbury left Mayhew for the Choctaw agency to attend the payment of the tribal annuity and to discuss with leaders of the Six Towns district the possibility of a school there.[36]

Missionaries were not the only influence changing the lives of some Choctaws. A group of about one hundred who had no clan affiliation and hence no settled place of residence or claim on the tribal annuities took up residence near Captain Folsom's home. Folsom encouraged them to give up drinking and to lead a settled life, and he also explained the missionaries' aims. Since Alfred Wright resided at Captain Folsom's house, he had an opportunity to preach to this group.[37]

Influential Choctaw leaders continued to support the efforts of the Missionaries to establish new schools, even if the support did not always come in quite the way the missionaries would have

liked. In April of 1822 Major John Pitchlyn, a mixed-blood leader who was the chief interpreter for the Choctaws in their negotiations with the U.S. government, gave a donation of $1,000 by forgiving a note that he held for that amount. He said that although he did not consider himself a pious man, he was glad that his children would be educated by the missionaries.[38]

The school at the mission station at Mayhew opened on April 30, 1822. Twelve children, eight Choctaws and four children of missionaries, comprised the student body. The Indian children had their native dress exchanged for clothing donated to the missions, with the fervent wish that "these previous little immortals may be clothed in robes washed, and made white, in the blood of the Lamb."[39]

Despite the expressed desires of some of the Choctaw for education, there was still strong suspicion of the intentions of the missionaries. The journal of Mayhew Mission for June 10, 1822 mentions this suspicion. "Many of them cannot believe that we possess that disinterested benevolence which we profess . . . Wicked white people are not wanting, who endeavor to persuade the Indians that our object is gain."[40]

These aspersions did not dissuade some Choctaws from bringing their children to the school and speaking in its support. Mush-o-la-tub-bee came to a conference at Mayhew in July with fifteen to twenty captains from his district and two of his sons and a nephew to put in the school. Another elderly Choctaw man brought his daughter and his grandson. Of the grandson he said, "I wish you to take him by the arm and the heart, and hold him fast. I shall hereafter only hold him by the end of his fingers."[41] Given the strong sense of relationship between grandfathers and grandchildren, the old man's statement represents a significant commitment to the education of his grandson.

Major John Pitchlyn and Captain David Folsom visited the school and spoke to the children, saying that they must learn the ways of the white people who were settling and becoming so numerous. The missionaries could teach them to read and write and cultivate crops and deal with mechanical things. Nothing was said about the religious import of what the missionaries had to teach.[42] The next day, Kingsbury addressed the council of Choctaws that had assembled at the school. He pointed out that the Choctaws themselves had contributed $4,000 toward the school; the President of the United States had contributed $1,275,

and the American Board had contributed $8,000. He stressed that the white man did not owe anything to the Choctaws but gave of his own free will. The white people came to the Indians, he argued, to save them from ruin. He continued: The fate that had befallen other tribes could be avoided. The white man had prospered because of the Good Book, and if the Choctaw would accept its teachings, they too could have good things. But the children must accept discipline, since that was part of the teaching of the Good Book, and parents must not object if their children were punished for disobedience. The children must not take the clothes they were given away from the mission. The parents must be prompt in returning their children to school after vacation periods.[43]

A major objective of the talk was to impress on the Choctaws the obligation Kingsbury thought they owed the white people, "and that they must expect [the schools] to be managed in all respects, not according to their own views, but according to the views of the President, and the good people who established them."[44] The tone of Kingsbury's sermon did not sit well with the assembled Choctaws, although they did not object openly. Although Kingsbury emphasized white supremacy and Choctaw dependence, the Choctaws themselves wanted the school, and the efforts of the missionaries were being directed to a large extent by their desires.

Had Kingsbury had his way, the missionaries' efforts would have been devoted primarily to preaching and conversion, and education would have been a secondary concern. The actual situation was the opposite. It would continue to be, and leaders of the missionary families would continue to debate the relative importance of preaching versus teaching among the Choctaw. Kingsbury and Cyrus Byington were the main spokesmen for the opposing points of view. Kingsbury laid plans for the schools but always resented the burdens of secular life that they imposed. Byington devoted his efforts to developing texts in the Choctaw language for use in the schools to educate the children in reading, writing and arithmetic, but he believed that this facility would ultimately make it easier for them to learn the Christian doctrine. Preaching and teaching were both directed at the same end, but they were the objects of considerable controversy among the missionaries.

The influence of Christian ideals on individual Choctaws as a

result of missionary efforts was apparent. The American Board received a letter from Hwoo-la-ta-hoo-mah, chief of the Six-towns, dated October 18, 1822, describing laws that he had passed for his people. The *Missionary Herald* noted that it was possible that the letter had been dictated by some white person, but that the handwriting was definitely that of the chief. Among the laws were ones calling for the destruction of any whiskey brought into the nation by any Choctaw who had traded with white people, punishment for infanticide, for stealing hogs or cattle, and for polygamy and adultery. For those who went to Mobile and New Orleans and neglected their crops, their corn was to be burnt.

The Chief concluded his letter with the remark "We have made the above laws, because we wish to follow the ways of the white people. We hope they will assist us in getting our children educated." Kingsbury noted in a letter to the board that "some active and well disposed young half-breeds, particularly Joel Nail," were instrumental in procuring these laws.[45]

However well-disposed some of the Choctaws leaders were toward the missionary schools, there was also dissatisfaction among some students and parents. The mission journal of Mayhew reported to January 12, 1821 that four parents had come to investigate unfavorable reports circulating about the schools. The reports began, according to the journal, when some young boys who wanted to go home complained about their treatment. Kingsbury and the other missionaries were able to convince the parents that the discipline to which their children were subjected was necessary. The woman in the group expressed her desire to become a student but Kingsbury reluctantly denied her wish. Already the school could not accommodate all the children who might attend.[46]

The emphasis of the missionaries upon manual labor for the children and physical discipline went counter to the very permissive ways of Indian parents. Choctaw children learned by example, by emulating their parents in their daily chores, and the ethics and values of the tribe were passed down by grandparents who sat the children down in the evening for lectures about what was right and what was wrong. Children had a great deal of freedom in their own society because they were constantly involved in the world of adults, observing and mimicking them. Discipline was enforced by teasing or ridiculing children who were acting

inappropriately. The system of formal instruction, organized work details, and sometimes physical punishment was quite foreign to Choctaw child-rearing and education practices, and the complaints of children would continue to be heard with sympathy by Choctaw elders and would be a continuing cause of discontent with the mission schools.

In 1825, the United States government and the tribe negotiated another treaty of land cession. This treaty established a boundary between the Choctaw lands west of the Mississippi and the Arkansas territory. In consideration of the cession, the United States agreed to pay to the Choctaw nation an annuity of $6,000, forever. For the first twenty years, however, the annuity was to be applied by the President to support schools in the nation, "and extending to it the benefits of instruction in the mechanic and ordinary arts of life." The government also agreed to survey and sell the 54 sections of land that had been set aside for the support of schools in the Treaty of Doak's Stand.[47]

This annuity for education did not go to the schools of the American Board but to the Choctaw Academy in Kentucky. Choctaw discontent with the missionaries and their schools was expressed in part by their support of the Academy, which was to play an important part in the education of future tribal leaders.

The existence of the Academy predated the Treaty, but its impact on the nation up to 1825 was slight. It had originally been established in 1818 by the Baptist Mission Society of Kentucky at Great Crossings, and it admitted its first class of eight boys in the spring of 1819. Its initial success was short-lived, and missionary contributions dropped off during the 1820–21 school year. However, Elias Cornelius of the American Board expressed concern about its existence to Kingsbury in a letter of March 8, 1820. But the Baptist Mission Society decided to close the school in 1821.

The Academy was reopened, however, at the request of the Choctaw leader Musholatubbee in 1825. The man who was responsible for the reopening was Richard Johnson, a rather flamboyant military man and Kentucky politician whose political fortunes rested in part on his claims that he had been the man who killed the great Shawnee leader Tecumseh at the Battle of the Thames in 1813. The financial support came from the $6,000 annuity provided by the Choctaw Treaty of 1825.[48]

The first class consisted of 26 Choctaw pupils and ten young

men from the surrounding area. The curriculum included "reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar, geography, practical surveying, astronomy, and vocal music," and the equipment included a pair of elegant artificial globes, a variety of atlases, two surveying compasses, one orrery, an octant, a quadrant and a telescope.[49]

Although the expense of the academy was relatively great, Greenwood LeFlore wrote to Secretary of War Barbour on January 9, 1828 to approve its location and assert his support. "I am perfectly Satisfyed with the Establishment in its present form. And although it is probable that we could get our children Taught Something cheaper yet we do not wish to put out their Education to the Lowest Bidder. . . ."[50]

The list of students in the school for 1827 shows the names of most of the prominent mixed-blood families in the Choctaw nation—Folsom, Pitchlynn, Nail, Juzon, Harkins, Garland, Perry, Durant, LeFlore.[51] There were also students who were probably full-bloods. We can infer this fact from the names reported and the custom of the missionaries to give recognizable names to students who came with traditional Choctaw names. Thus we find in the list Alexander Pope and Samuel Worcester. We also find William Ward, the son of the Choctaw agent William Ward, evidence that the school served some of the sons of white settlers in the region. It was necessary for a student to have a certificate from a school in the Choctaw nation before he could be admitted to the Academy.[52]

The success of the Choctaw Academy depended upon the education that students received at the schools of the American Board, and the requirement that they have a certificate for those schools represents a triumph for interdenominational education. However, the Academy drew away the young men who might otherwise have gone to the Board's missionary school in Cornwall, Connecticut. The Board report of 1826 noted that "... there is at present no disposition, either among the Cherokees or Choctaws, to send their young men to Cornwall."[53] The Choctaw Academy was becoming the preparatory school of the Choctaw nation, and the education there was secular rather than religious.

The Academy had the support of Choctaw leaders. LeFlore and Musholatubbee both visited. But one of its students was highly

critical of certain non-academic aspects of the school. Peter Pitchlynn charged that, among other things, the food was bad, the linen dirty, and the coffee weak. Richard Johnson responded vigorously in a letter of September 12, 1828, to Col. David Folsom refuting the charges. His letter was accompanied by the signatures of Pierre Juzan, Geo. W. Harkins, Selas D. Fisher, Saml. Worcester, Saml. Garland, and Robert Jones. Thomas Henderson, headmaster of the school, wrote to the Indian Office that the school had very good food and provided adequate clothing and footware. He didn't comment on the quality of the coffee.[54]

Despite this criticism from a student, Choctaw leaders continued to support the schools. Musalatubbe, Oklabbee, Ispiahhomah, Charles King, James M. King, Hiram King, and Peter King wrote to Andrew Jackson (December 23, 1830) to complain bitterly that "we have employed and payed those Yankee Missionarys for twelve years . . . we have never Recd. a Scholar out of their Schools that was able to keep a grog shop Book when we found that we could get nothing from them we Established an academy in Kentucky . . . from which we have Recd. a great number of first Rate Scholars."[55]

The American Board was also facing competition from another denomination. In December of 1823, Methodists appeared in Choctaw territory. Although the organization of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church on April 5, 1819 coincided closely with the passage of the Civilization Act, it was not until December of 1823 that a missionary was appointed to the Choctaws by the Mississippi Conference.[56]

The Bishop of the Conference, William Winans, held very low opinions of the competing denominations among the Indians. He wrote to a fellow clergyman in July of 1824 that "If there is anything more ridiculous, in the religious world, than every thing else, it is the Baptist domestick Missions; and the Presbyterian Missions among the Indians especially, are oppressive; and, if not quite unprofitable, are of but little value."[57]

Wiley Ledbetter was appointed to ride the circuit among the Choctaws, and after he began, Winans reported that he was "still flourishing greatly among the Indians," although he needed money.[58] And in December of 1824, at a session of the conference in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, Ledbetter produced tangible evidence of his efforts. He introduced to the bishop of that conference

some converted Choctaw Indians. Bishop Soule's soul "was deeply stirred within him. Standing erect in all his imposing stature, eyes filled with tears of joy, he cried out; 'Brethren, the Choctaws are ours. No, I mistake; they are Christ's.' "[59]

Whoever laid claim to the Choctaws—the Methodists, Jesus Christ, or the American Board who had been working among the tribe since 1819—it appears that Choctaw souls were viewed as trophies by several competing parties. The competition between Presbyterians and Methodists hinted at in Winans's statement regarding rival denominations became overt during 1824 when Ledbetter attempted to lay a claim to Bethany, a school that had been established by the American Board.

It is not clear whether the rather general Choctaw disaffection with the schools was a result of the new Methodist influence or whether the Methodists simply benefited from it. Ledbetter had approached Captain Robert Cole about taking over the mission school named Bethany near his house, and had offered to board and clothe the children there. His action was taken without any consultation with Dr. William Pride, the teacher at the school, or with Kingsbury, who complained vigorously to Evarts about the action. Cole had delegated to one of his subordinate chiefs the task of telling Pride that his services were no longer needed.[60]

Kingsbury also complained to Bishop Winans about Ledbetter's action. The takeover of the school represented the loss of an investment of over $1,000 by the Board. Kingsbury pointed out to Winans that the school was under the patronage of the United States government, and Secretary of War John C. Calhoun wrote to the Choctaw delegation that was in Washington for treaty negotiations, pointing out to them that the school in question was under Kingsbury's supervision.[61]

Despite the importuning, Ledbetter evidently retained control of the school, and it was only his failure to fulfill his promise to board and clothe the pupils that led to the adandonment of the school altogether.[62] Ledbetter's success among the Choctaws came to an abrupt end after this failure. In 1825 it was noted by the conference that Ledbetter had failed to convert a single Indian, and he was finally "located" by the Mississippi Conference, i.e., moved to a different site.

After his departure the Methodist effort among the Choctaw languished until 1827, when Alexander Talley, a physician, was appointed missionary.[63] He began his work in the spring of 1828,

and he evidently found a welcome at the home of Greenwood Leflore, since several of his letters were written there. He rode his circuit for the first two months without an interpreter, but he reported success in a council that Leflore had arranged and at which he had interpreted Talley's words.[64] Leflore was to remain the most important proponent of Methodism among the Mississippi Choctaws before removal. He also laid the groundwork for several schools in Choctaw communities.

Continuing discontent among the Choctaws with the schools of the American Board missionaries may have contributed to the success of Talley's efforts. Kingsbury wrote to Evarts in the summer of 1827 that " . . . the Missionaries & the schools in the nation are in very low estimation among the people generally in the nation."[65]

Part of the problem was the existence of the Choctaw Academy. Part was ongoing disaffection. But an incident at the American Board school at Bethel probably contributed to the level of Choctaw discontent. In June of 1828 Zeddock Brashears wrote to Kingsbury to charge that Stephen McComber, the teacher at Bethel, had impregnated his granddaughter, Susan Lyle.[66] Under questioning, the girl reported that McComber had seduced her, and McComber admitted the charges. Although Leflore demanded a money payment to the girl's family, Kingsbury was willing to concede only that the missionary family would contribute monetarily to the support of the girl and her child.[67]

McComber was removed from the station at Bethel and ultimately dismissed from missionary service. Alexander Talley mentioned the incident to Winans early on, and although he indicated that he was still in favor of the missionaries, he also said, "I have taken such a course as to keep our work and standing distinct."[68]

Talley's influence among the Choctaws was primarily centered on his relationship with the LeFlore family. Because the LeFlore residence was a center of political activity, and Talley was often there, he was able to reach a number of leaders. Three chiefs who appeared at LeFlore's home on business stayed for a prayer meeting conducted by Talley and "at the close of the first prayer a deep seriousness appeared on every countenance." The chiefs "humbled themselves in the dust" with other potential converts at the end of the meeting and showed signs of true conversion.[69] At the same meeting Col. LeFlore's wife and mother showed

signs of conversion to Methodism, and eventually Talley converted LeFlore himself, when he was grieving over the death of his wife.[70]

Talley realized the conflict with the Presbyterians that Methodist conversions presaged, especially so significant a conversion as that of LeFlore, one of the most important Choctaw leaders. "We have been on friendly terms with the Presbyterians, but I fear this will not last much longer. We are beginning to admit persons into society, around Elliot, which I think likely to produce a breach, but if the people wish it we shall go fearlessly forward." He also complained that a Choctaw youth who had been at a school in Kentucky (the Choctaw Academy) and had been educated as a Baptist Preacher was trying to baptize Methodist converts without telling them that he represented a different denomination.[71]

The impact of missionary activity in 1827-29 came primarily in the form of large-scale conversions at camp meetings for the Methodists. Talley reported in 1829 that some 1300 persons, most of them Choctaws, were reported to have experienced the very emotional state associated with conversion. Indeed, during one meeting the attentions of Brother Smith and several Choctaw chiefs were attracted to the son of a prominent chief, "who had retired to his fire, and was now so much affected that we were apprehensive he would fall into the fire by which he was standing. From these feelings we were soon relieved by his falling a different course."[72]

The missionaries of the American Board saw the results of the camp meeting among the Choctaw. They noted in the late summer of 1828 a more than ordinary interest among the Choctaw in the public preaching of the gospel. But where the Methodists would claim about 1300 conversions as a result of camp meetings during 1828-29, the efforts of the American Board in the period from July 1, 1828 to July 1, 1829, produced only 28 additions to their membership.[73] The American Board adopted the technique of camp meetings held in the woods near Choctaw villages.[74]

The difference in rates of conversion was as much a function of the definitions of conversion and the interpretation of its manifestation as it was a result of any specific efforts by the missionaries. The American Board demanded signs of complete conversion over a period of time before they would accept the evidence as real. Those who came forward to sit on the anxious

seats at Presbyterian meetings had to do so for long periods of time, and had to demonstrate in their behavior the fact of submission to God's will. The Methodists were willing to accept the highly emotional behavior apparent in a single episode as evidence that a person had been moved by God. The Presbyterians expressed strong skepticism about Methodist conversions, and the Methodists knew that they were a real threat to the hold that the American Board was trying to establish over the Choctaw.

The appeal of the Methodists in converting Choctaws is understandable in light of traditional Choctaw beliefs in individual visionary experiences, which were highly emotional, and in traditional patterns of ceremonial activity that brought together large groups of people. The camp meeting allowed Choctaws to express both the highly emotional aspect of their own religious life and their own traditional social predilections. The Presbyterians, in their stress upon personal unworthiness, personal guilt, and individual conversion, went very strongly counter to traditional Choctaw ideas of collective identity.

The missionaries of both denominations had their greatest impact on the mixed-blood members of the tribe, and they came under harsh criticism from the full-blood chiefs. The schools that they started served the children of mixed-blood families more often because they were located primarily around the communities that grew up around the establishments of mixed blood leaders such as the Folsoms and LeFlores. Their influence measured in the number of conversions they reported is slight. By the end of 1830, the Board could report only about 360 converts in the Choctaw nation, of which we can estimate that approximately 250 were Choctaws.[75]

Choctaw leaders, both full bloods and mixed bloods, wanted education that would allow their children to deal with the white men on their own terms. And missionaries found themselves offering education to Choctaw children when many of them would rather have been preaching the gospel. It is ironic that the most tangible and possibly the most lasting result of missionary activity among the Choctaw in Mississippi was the preservation of the Choctaw language. The translations that Cyrus Byington made of biblical texts and school books introduced Choctaws to literacy. Even today in the Choctaw communities in central Mississippi, there are many who maintain that the published version of the Bible in Choctaw prepared by Cyrus Byington is the defini-

tive version of Choctaw orthography. By teaching the reading and writing of the language, missionaries helped to make possible the continuation of language in Choctaw communities and to preserve the sense of identity that has sustained those communities to the present.

NOTES

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