

ITI FABVSSA

A pair of young dark brown eyes watched as the car that brought her here winded its way back up the drive. The brown eyes of her mother looked back at her and she could see that although they were full of tears, they were smiling and telling her to be brave. The young girl gave a small wave as the car passed through the gate and finally let a tear fall down her cheek. She was already homesick and felt very much alone. She turned at the sound of giggling and gazed at the white buildings and Pushmataha Hall with its large porches. She took a deep breath to steady herself and caught the scent of roses that would guide her from the dormitory to her classes each day. She knew the story of Wheelock. Its history was told to her by her mother and grandmother. She knew that what she learned from these buildings and these teachers would create the groundwork that she would build her life on. She also knew that when she looked



Photo by Dawn Standridge

Friends and family gather at the first Wheelock Storytelling in March. Organizers hope to make this an annual event.

back at these years, she would remember the hardships of not being able to speak her native language, the work they were made to do and the illnesses endured. More often, the good times of laughter and lifelong friendships, favorite lessons and music, and the games would be remembered. She would have her own stories to tell one day and they were just beginning. At that moment, another pair of smiling eyes with braids came up and asked if the young girl wanted to play, and a ball was tossed into her hands.

Wheelock Academy is an integral part of the history and heritage of the Choctaw Nation. It was a visible acknowledgement by Choctaw leaders back in the early 1800s that formal education was essential to the survival of the Choctaws, as a sovereign nation and as a culturally rich people. It is also an acknowledgement by these leaders that having well educated young women was necessary to having a strong foundation on which to build the tribe. These young ladies would become wives and mothers who would encourage and raise future leaders. But many of these women would also go on to make contributions of their own to their communities as nurses, teachers, and civic leaders.

Tribal leaders had hoped that by adopting the religious practices and education of the emerging American society, they would be able to retain Choctaw ancestral lands and national identity. But unyielding pressure from the U.S. government and states forced removal of the Choctaws. The Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek was signed in September 1830 and became the first removal treaty signed under the Indian Removal Act. The Choctaws began the dangerous journey to Indian Territory (Oklahoma) over what is commonly referred to as the "Trail of Tears."

Reverend Alfred Wright and his wife, Harriet, arrived in southeastern Indian Territory to continue the mission work they started in Mississippi. Wheelock began as a mission day school

in 1833 but became a small boarding school as the need for a facility of its type arose. A few years after the War ended, a fire destroyed most of the buildings at the old mission site with the church being the only surviving structure. In 1883, the Choctaw General Council appropriated funds for a new school to be built near the previous mission site. The first buildings were constructed in 1883-1884 and it was opened to students in the fall of 1884. Fifty students were enrolled and would move into the new dormitory named Pushmataha Hall, in honor of the late Choctaw Chief.

Additional buildings would be added over the years and control of the school would change hands multiple times as a result of federal government involvement. Wheelock Academy would see its last class of graduates in 1955.

Over the years, many of the buildings have been lost to the elements. Wilson Hall (the school building) and the iconic Pushmataha Hall are in grave danger of following suit. Three buildings have been restored to the point of being usable: the superintendent's office and cottage, and Leflore Hall. Leflore Hall, originally the teachers' dormitory, now houses the Wheelock Academy Museum and Gift Shop.

There is a renewed interest in preserving the campus of Wheelock Academy. Architects and engineers have been conducting a feasibility study of the aging buildings funded by Choctaw Nation. The study will determine what can be done to sustain Wilson and Pushmataha Halls so that they may continue to be used to educate future generations. The results of the study should be available in 2016.



Photo Provided

Wilson Hall (left) and Pushmataha Hall are two of the Wheelock buildings in dire need of restoration.