

# Iti Fabvssa

## The Choctaw Academy: Investing in Future Choctaw Leaders

Continuing the *Iti Fabvssa* series on missionaries and education, this month's article focuses on an early Baptist school in Choctaw country.

As many are aware, the boarding and mission schools of the 1800's and 1900's hold a complicated legacy in our nation's education history.

While there were few Baptist boarding schools in Choctaw country, one Baptist school holds a special place in history: the Choctaw Academy of Scott County, Kentucky.

Following the treaty of Washington City in 1825, the United States promised the Choctaw Nation \$6,000 per year, forever, as part of the payment for Choctaw land. Article 2 of the treaty dedicated the first 20 years of the payment to "the support of schools in [Choctaw] nation, and extending to it the benefits of instruction in the mechanic and ordinary arts of life" ('Treaty with the Choctaw, 1825').

By request of Choctaw leaders, the school was placed outside Choctaw lands. In doing so, Choctaw people could better control their own direct environment without foreigners living amongst them.

The school for native children would still expose Choctaw children to the ways of Euro-Americans without putting them in an otherwise all-white school.

The overwhelming push for education by the Choctaw people was strategic. Armed with the proper skills, the next generation of Choctaws would defend the people's rights and lands going forward.

Funded by the government money and sponsored by the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions, the Choctaw Academy began in 1825 and closed in 1845 with the last students leaving in 1848.

Colonel Richard Morton Johnson, lawyer, politician, and future Vice President of the United States, provided his farm and buildings in Great Crossings, Kentucky as the site of the school in exchange for monetary compensation.

Reverend Thomas Henderson, minister of the local Great Crossings Baptist Church, served as superintendent for the academy more than 15 years.

Reverend Henderson was known for his kindness, patience, and good intentions towards the students. He singlehandedly ran and taught a variety of subjects at the school for years until further teaching staff was hired.

He also served as the middle man between Richard Johnson and the students. As the superintendent, Henderson advocated for educational quality and opportunities for the boys while Johnson pressured to save the school's funding so that he could pay off personal debts.

Enrollment at the academy often ran around 150 students with the ability to hold up to 200 students. While the academy always had a majority of Choctaw students, the school brought in sons from prominent families from many other tribes including Chickasaw, Cherokee, Creek, Seminole, Apalachicola, Miami, Quapaw, Pottawatomi and Chicaga as well as some white families in the region.

The early years of the Choctaw Academy promised a bright future for Indian education. Many students thrived here and learned to wield a strong, modern voice through literacy and education in the classics.

These students continued on to serve in core leadership positions in their tribes in the capacities of chiefs, councilmen, lawyers, ministers, teachers, administrators, doctors and more.

Their subjects of study included reading, writing, history, Latin, mathematics, astronomy, geography, surveying and accounting, with a few motivated students pursuing medicine and law.

Later in the mid-1830's the focus moved to learning trade skills such as blacksmithing, boot and shoe making, tailoring and wagon making. Notable alumni of the Choctaw Academy include Peter Pitchlynn, Adam Nail, Alfred Wade, Adam Christie, John Page, David Folsom, Israel Folsom, Peter Folsom and Thompson McKinney among many others.

During the time of the Choctaw Academy, the Trail of Tears began.

Students' families moved westward and some joined for the journey while others followed later upon leaving their schooling.

After removal and in the years that followed, government officials increasingly struggled to find Choctaws that wished to send their children to Kentucky.

Many boys were too weak after the long journey from the homelands. Soon after arriving in Oklahoma, newly established missions started up schools in Choctaw Nation that were far closer to home and easier to regulate.

As education continued at the Choctaw Academy, the students began to use their newfound voice to work as activists.

During his time as a student there, Peter Pitchlynn wrote an extensive report of complaint during his stay at the academy citing unkempt living conditions and difficult relationships between the school staff and students.

Pitchlynn was a star student at the Academy, but his report did not please Richard Johnson. Johnson benefited from a well-run school full of satisfied students and parents.

Disagreements between outspoken students and the Choctaw Academy staff would continue and increase over the course of its years as a school for elite native students.

In later years, Choctaw student and future doctor Adam Nail created more waves for the Choctaw Academy.

Under the close instruction of the Academy's doctor, Nail became a doctor that incorporated his new understanding of Western medicine with his own knowledge of Choctaw medicinal practices.

During his time at the Academy where he eventually became the students' physician, Dr. Nail advocated for the well-being and health of the students.

Further, his concern about the education and moral conditions of the school as it declined led him to take steps to raise awareness of the problems at the Academy.

Dr. Nail organized a petition and submitted reports to leaders in the federal government and the tribe.

In 1841, following lobbying efforts and the start of a successful career, Pitchlynn filled the position of superintendent of the school.

Rather than moving to improve the school, Pitchlynn planned to close the school in favor of attributing funds to schools located within the Choctaw Nation territory.

He recognized the significance of his role as a Choctaw person and his ability to act as strong force on behalf of his people (Snyder 245).

As Francine Locke-Bray points out in an unpublished manuscript, these actions by students like Pitchlynn and Nail were part of the light that came out of the Choctaw Academy.

While sometimes complex and controversial, the Academy provided a space that shaped and formed future activists who would work on behalf of our people for the good of the tribe in the fields of education, medicine, law and government.

Some Choctaw Academy alumni went on to serve as influential leaders in growing Christian communities.

Known as the first Choctaw ordained as a Baptist minister, Peter Folsom left the Choctaw Academy and joined his tribe in Oklahoma in 1830, a year after becoming a Christian.

Folsom continued in the faith and baptism he gained at the Academy to promote Christianity in Oklahoma.

Through his leadership, Folsom welcomed the first Baptist missionaries into the new Indian Territory.

He would spend his life's work preaching, starting Baptist churches both in Oklahoma and back in Mississippi in the homelands, and contributing to Baptist publications like "The Indian Missionary" in the 1880-1890s.

Folsom was a key part in the spark and growth of the Baptist Church in Choctaw lands.

Following this great Choctaw Baptist's death, fellow Baptist Dr. J. S. Murrow wrote of Folsom that, "In physical appearance, Brother Folsom was tall and commanding. He was born a leader. He had a sweet and gentle disposition, was extremely hospitable and easily imposed upon. In the councils and business affairs of his nation he was also a leader and his impress on its welfare was large and good. His character in every respect was unimpeachable. The nation, the church, and the world have lost few better or more useful men than Peter Folsom" (quoted in Marks).

Many stories came out of the Choctaw Academy, Baptist missions, and boarding schools. If you have a story you would like to share, please contact the Historic Preservation Department at [jbyram@choctawnation.com](mailto:jbyram@choctawnation.com) or 1-800-522-6170 ext. 2512.

#### Bibliography

Locke Bray, Francine. 'The Choctaw Academy Georgetown, KY 1825-1848: LESSONS NOT LEARNED.' Unpublished manuscript, Indianapolis: Indiana University, 2005.

Marks, Luther Whitfield. 'The Story of Oklahoma Baptists.' Unpublished manuscript, Oklahoma: Oklahoma Baptist Historical Commission.

Mould, Tom. *Choctaw Tales*. Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2004.

Snyder, Christina. *Great Crossings: Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in the Age of Jackson*. New York: Oxford University, 2017.

'Treaty with the Choctaw, 1825.' In *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties*. Vol. II (Treaties). Compiled and edited by Charles J. Kappler. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1904. P. 211-214.



by Francine Locke-Bray

**This is the only original building remaining from the Choctaw Academy near Georgetown, Kentucky. The school was funded by government money following the Treaty of Washington City in 1825 and sponsored by the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions. It opened in 1825 and closed in 1845, with the last students leaving in 1848. Colonel Richard Morton Johnson, a lawyer, politician and future Vice President of the United States, provided his farm and buildings in Kentucky as the site of the school in exchange for monetary compensation.**



Courtesy Choctaw Tales, pg 7

**Reverend Peter Folsom was known as the first Choctaw to be ordained as a Baptist minister. He was a key part of the growth of the Baptist church in Choctaw lands.**