

Temple of Education: The Cherokee Female Seminary: Hope Building on Hope

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Between 1851 and 1909 in the Cherokee Nation of Indian Territory there is a story, on the whole a positive story, a story of self-determination, of persistence, a story of hope. It is the story of the Cherokee Male and Female seminaries.

In this paper I would like to focus on the Female Seminary not only because of constraints of time and space, but also because in the context of the era female higher education would have been considered as exotic as or perhaps even more exotic than non-European-American higher education. This story as a whole has been treated at some length in recent years, most notably in *Cultivating the Rosebuds* by Devon Mihesua (1998), and in a 1999 doctoral thesis by Lou Ann Herda, in addition to being part of other works about the Cherokee Nation or women's education, but it is still worth re-telling.

I also want to look at the underlying ideas of female education and Native American education as they were understood and debated in the nineteenth century. Ideas build on other ideas, either by combining them, or expanding upon them, or even by rebelling against them. *Hopefulness* uses previous hope, both as an inspiration and as a practical blueprint. Yes, sometimes hopeful ideas may be naive, or misguided, or tainted by ulterior motives, or even used as a cover for evil, but they are still worth studying as *hopefulness*, as a *positive concept*.

The first point of controversy was whether females should be educated outside the home at all. After that followed the questions of, "Which subjects?" and "By what methods?" In the earliest years of this country, parents who wished an education beyond basic literacy for their girls taught them at home, or had tutors come to the home. A few fathers taught their daughters Latin and Greek, and even "natural philosophy," which we today would call "science," but most felt that a young lady's educational needs were the female accomplishments of drawing, music, dancing, and, above all, fancy needlework. In the late eighteenth century there were small private schools for young ladies, but the subject matter stayed the same.¹ Eventually some education reformers began to see a need to teach more substantial subject matter, even to females. In the North, especially in New England, the main concern was with young women, who failing to find a husband, or failing to find one right away, might need to support themselves by teaching, one of the few respectable jobs open to women. Among the Southern elite, the competition for

¹ Farnham, Christie Anne. *The Education of the Southern Belle: Higher Education and Student Socialization in the Antebellum South*. (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 39-41.

an educated husband called for the young women to also be well-educated as a mark of her social class.²

Debate would continue throughout the nineteenth century as to whether it was proper, necessary, or even healthy for young ladies to be taught the same subjects at the same level of mental rigor as their brothers, whether they should be exposed to the scholarly competition that went with awarding degrees,³ and how much physical exercise at school was healthy.⁴ Nevertheless, by the mid-nineteenth century there were several institutions of higher learning for older girls or young women.

One of the earliest of the New England schools, and perhaps the most famous, was Mount Holyoke, which opened for classes in Massachusetts in 1837.⁵ This boarding school, which was open to females from the age of sixteen through their twenties was primarily set up to train teachers and missionaries (or rather, missionaries' wives). This is the school that served as a model for the Cherokee Female Seminary. Indeed, the first principal and assistant teacher of the Female Seminary were Mount Holyoke Alumnae.⁶

It's interesting to note that the Cherokee may have been more open than Euro-Americans to new ideas of expanding the sphere of women. Women had long been part of the political structure. Female elders were respected.⁷ In short, the Cherokee already believed that females had rational minds which could profit from knowledge. This is not to say that homemaking skills and modest behavior were not important – or even pre-eminent – but only that there was also room for, and a need for, such subjects as science, mathematics, and languages.

The early view of Indian education is problematic for modern scholars, because its goal was in a direction we now consider to be wrong – cultural assimilation. Leaving aside the policymakers who wanted to use "education" and assimilation as steps toward getting Indian land for their own speculation, the education of Native Americans was genuinely thought to be a good thing, both by white missionaries and other educators and leaders, and by many Cherokees.⁸

Long before the nineteenth century, schools had been established for Native American children and young men. These were usually run by missionaries, with the main intent of spreading Christianity, a book-based religion in which literacy was seen as

² Ibid., 2-3.

³ Davies, Emily. "The Influence of University Degrees on the Education of Women," in Rowold, Katharina, ed. *Gender and Science: Late Nineteenth-Century Debates on the Female Mind and Body*. (Bristol, England: Thoemmes Press, 1996), 1-14.

⁴ "The Higher Education of Women," in Rowold, 227; Farnham, 126.

⁵ Cole, Arthur C. *A Hundred Years of Mount Holyoke College: The Evolution of an Educational Ideal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940), 1.

⁶ Miheesuah, Devon A. *Cultivating the Rosebuds: The Education of Women at the Cherokee Female Seminary, 1851-1909*. (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 27-28, 30-31.

⁷ Ibid., 10.

⁸ Skelton, Robert H. *A History of the Educational System of the Cherokee Nation, 1801-1910*. (Fayetteville, Arkansas: University of Arkansas, 1970), 66-67.

useful. One of the earliest was the Brafferton Institute, an Anglican seminary for American Indian youths connected to the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg Virginia. It flourished (if teaching six to twenty-four students at a time could be considered flourishing) in the late seventeenth through early-to-mid eighteenth centuries.⁹ The turn of the nineteenth century saw the first mission schools among the Cherokees, run by Moravians and Presbyterians.¹⁰ Perhaps the most famous, and one of the most successful, was the Brainerd Mission (1818-1838), a joint missionary-U.S. Government effort in Tennessee.¹¹

There was more going on here than teaching students to be able to read the Bible. There was, at the time, a hierarchical concept of human societies. At the bottom were the "savages," the oldest type of society, "in the hunter state" (as Thomas Jefferson put it in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*),¹² which may or may not be supplemented by simple agriculture. Over the eons, it was believed, mankind had progressed through agriculture to finally reach the pinnacle of "civilization," which was a society with sophisticated agriculture and cities, in short, contemporary Europe and the European-settled parts of America. Some of the world's people, had, unhappily, gotten stuck at earlier stages, but they could – and indeed, needed to – progress to the top by means of proper education and effort. It seemed to the Europeans and European-Americans that the Native People of the Americas were stuck in time, and would benefit from being brought into the present, to a "higher" level of culture. Therefore, these schools taught, in addition to academic subjects (and in the case of the missions schools, Christian doctrine), Euro-American culture.

In the later 1800s it was the United States Government, through the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which ran day schools and boarding schools, both on and off the reservations. The most famous of these was the Carlisle Indian Boarding School in Pennsylvania. By this time the educators had taken a reasonable idea too far and mixed it with racial prejudices. The emphasis moved from enlightenment to "kill[ing] the [inner] Indian."¹³ Students were taken from their families – often by force or trickery, and sometimes for several years at a time – given "Christian," that is, English, names, dressed in Euro-American clothes, and made accustomed to using Euro-American furniture. Not only school hours but the routines of everyday living were on a strict schedule. This was the usual practice in any boarding school, but for many of these students, it would have been their first exposure to the concept of time by the clock. It was considered to be especially important to teach "proper" work habits, so at many of the schools the students

⁹ Wallace, Anthony F. C. *Jefferson and the Indians: The Tragic Fate of the First Americans*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1999), 277-278; Jefferson, Thomas. *Notes on the State of Virginia*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 144-145.

¹⁰ Skelton, 31, 33.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹² Jefferson, 186-7.

¹³ Richard H. Pratt, *Official Report of the Nineteenth Annual Conference of Charities and Correction*. 1892, qtd. in "'Kill the Indian and Save the Man': Capt. Richard H. Pratt on the Education of Native Americans," <<http://historymatters.gme.edu/d/4929/>>.

did chores, and many schools taught vocational subjects – mainly farming skills and/or manual trades for the boys and cooking, cleaning, sewing, etc. for the girls.¹⁴

The Cherokee Nation schools were established a couple of generations before the heyday of the national boarding schools, and while at first glance the values and principles might seem to have been similar, the schools were, in fact, quite different in attitude and atmosphere. Attendance was voluntary, and while the goal was to become educated and modern, there was still room for being proud to be Cherokee.¹⁵ For instance, we know that the girls at the seminary who had Cherokee names were not forced to change them to English names.¹⁶

The history of the Cherokees, like the history of other Native People of the Western Hemisphere, is one of war, broken treaties, and the theft of their homeland, culminating in the forced march known as the "Trail of Tears" from Georgia to what is now known as Oklahoma. Those who were forced out at gunpoint in 1838-40 were met in the new Indian Territory by others who had moved earlier. The Cherokee Nation, in the west as it had been in the east, was fractured into factions, and political opinions ran bitterly strong, even to the point of murder.¹⁷ This should not be too surprising, as the Cherokee Nation was, even at that point, a mixture of cultural groups. There were those – mostly, but not all fullbloods – who followed the traditional Cherokee culture conservatively, speaking Cherokee rather than English, keeping their belief in the religion of their forebears, and making their living mainly by small-scale farming. At the other end of the spectrum were those who lived much as upper-middle and upper-class, mainstream, European-descended, Americans did. Most of these were of mixed ancestry and many had a relatively high level of formal education. By this time, some had been living this way for generations, and had been brought up in homes where no Cherokee was spoken and few Cherokee traditions were followed.¹⁸ In spite of ideological differences, a functioning government was formed. As in most societies throughout history, most of the leaders came from the elite class. These people, having benefited from a Euro-American education, wanted that benefit extended to the rest of the Cherokee Nation.

It is important to note that among the Cherokees, this view of "progress" was much more widespread than in most other tribes. It has been said that when the first mission schools were being proposed at the turn of the nineteenth century, the Cherokees were not interested in the Gospel, but rather in the secular education that went with it.¹⁹ The progressive attitude was due in part to the intermixing between Cherokees and whites, especially, it seems from anecdotal evidence, whites of English, Irish, and Scots-

¹⁴ Adams, David Wallace. *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928*. (Lawrence Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 117, 149-150, 211.

¹⁵ Mihesuah, 83.

¹⁶ Examples include Qua-Tay and Na-Li, mentioned in Mihesuah, 37, 40-41.

¹⁷ Woodward, Grace Steele. *The Cherokees*. (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press), 1963.

¹⁸ Herda, Lou Ann. *The Cherokee National Female Seminary: Higher Education for Cherokee Females in the Nineteenth Century*. (Houston, Texas: University of Houston, 1999), 12; Mihesuah, 10-11.

¹⁹ Skelton 32, 76.

Irish origin. Not only did parents pass on cultural concepts, both directly and indirectly, but some white fathers provided educational opportunities for their mixed-blood sons.²⁰

Also, by the time of the removal, the Cherokee linguist Sequoyah had developed a syllabary uniquely suited to the Cherokee language. Enough people had learned to read by this time that a newspaper, *The Cherokee Phoenix*, was being printed using the syllabary.²¹ The concept of literacy, *per se*, was now a Cherokee attribute, and no longer tied exclusively to white culture.

And here's where the story of stubborn hope comes in. In 1841, just two years after the Trail of Tears, as the nation's leaders were re-organizing the Cherokee Nation in the new Indian Territory, they felt that it was important to provide a high-quality and comprehensive system of education. At the base would be a number of public schools at the elementary level, and above those an institution of higher learning for each gender.²² During the next ten years those plans were solidified and put into action. Curricula were developed, teachers were hired, and buildings, including two large, brick buildings, were built. In 1851 on May 6 and May 7 respectively, the Cherokee Male and Female Seminaries at Park Hill near Tahlequah opened for classes.²³

The Cherokee Female Seminary was initially seen as an institution of higher learning, perhaps most closely analogous to a modern high school. However, the structure of the present system was not worked out until decades later, and, at the time, "seminaries," "academies," "finishing schools," "normal schools," and "colleges" shared various attributes with modern high schools and community colleges, but did not necessarily correspond exactly. At first, tuition was free for all students, who after the first couple of years numbered about seventy-five.²⁴ The seminary's main goals were to prepare young Cherokee women to be fitting wives for the young Cherokee men who would become the nation's next generation of political and economic leaders, and to train them to teach in Cherokee schools. Here again, the goal of national self-sufficiency is evident. And, indeed, ninety-one alumnae went on to teach in the Cherokee Public School system, and twenty-eight graduates taught at the Seminary itself.²⁵

The curriculum was comparable to that of the Male Seminary, and, like other aspects of the school, was modeled after that of Mount Holyoke in Massachusetts. In the 1850s Greek history, "geography, Latin, [advanced] arithmetic, rhetoric, geometry, physiology, algebra, 'intellectual philosophy,' 'natural theology,' 'intellectual theology,' music," and literature were taught.²⁶ It was a boarding school from the beginning. When it first opened, the students had no housekeeping chores, unlike the students at Mount Holyoke. In later years they were given light housecleaning and gardening duties.²⁷

²⁰ Herda, 112.

²¹ Skelton, 68-70; Woodward, 143.

²² Mihesuah, 19-20, 22.

²³ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Appendices B, C, and D.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 31, 34-5.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

Although it was a secular rather than a missionary school, the culture of the time equated Christianity with good citizenship, so specifically Christian values were taught, and the girls were expected to go to church (any local church) on Sunday.²⁸

There was a rich extracurricular and social life at the school from the beginning. There was a school newspaper, the *Cherokee Rose Buds* (later *A Wreath of Cherokee Rose Buds*), with articles, stories, and poetry written by the students.²⁹ And there were concerts, occasional formal parties with the students of the Male Seminary, and educational and recreational trips into Tahlequah.³⁰

In 1856 the Female Seminary had to close due to a lack of funding. It re-opened for a few months in 1861, only to close again that year because of the Civil War. During that time the building became a military depot.³¹ The war left the Cherokee Nation in shambles. It shared the woes of both the border states, where some of the worst violence took place, and the South, as some of the Cherokee leaders had supported the Confederacy.³² The Seminary was not to open again until 1872,³³ and this time it remained successful until it closed its doors forever as a separate institution.

In 1873 a "primary" and a "preparatory" department were added for younger or less well-educated applicants. Tuition was instated, but was kept low, and fifty places were set aside for "indigent" primary students to attend tuition-free.³⁴ By the late nineteenth century there were well over two hundred students attending at all levels of the Seminary.³⁵

By the 1870s and 1880s classes had been added in "English history, geometry, chemistry, natural philosophy, rhetoric ... political economy, moral philosophy, trigonometry, analytical geometry, botany, geology, French, and German." Among the authors read during that era for their literary and, sometimes, historical significance were Julius Caesar, Cicero, Ovid, Thucydides, Virgil, Homer, Livy, Goethe, and Molière.³⁶

There was a brief gap in this success when the building burned down in 1887. A new building on the outskirts of Tahlequah was finished in 1889. This building was fully modern and state-of-the-art. It had full indoor plumbing, with hot and cold water, and central heating. By 1904 it was wired for electric lights.³⁷ While this may not have seemed impressive in New York, most private homes in rural or small town America did not get such amenities until the 1930s.

²⁸ Ibid., 61.

²⁹ Ibid., 36-37.

³⁰ Ibid., 35.

³¹ Herda, 88-89.

³² Debo, Angie. *A History of the Indians of the United States*. (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), 171-173, 178, 182-183.

³³ Mihesuah, 49.

³⁴ Ibid., 50.

³⁵ Ibid., 59.

³⁶ Ibid., 55.

³⁷ Ibid., 58.

This was the school's golden age. Literary, dramatic, and musical clubs were in full bloom, and there were optional music classes. Trips into town became more exciting, both recreational trips for ice cream or roller skating, and field trips to see the modern wonders of "the electric plant, ice factory, flour mills, and central telephone exchange."³⁸ As part of their civics education, even though this era was before females could participate in civic life (the Nineteenth Amendment would not be ratified until eleven years after the school closed), the students were also taken to political rallies.³⁹

There were dances and other events held jointly with the students from the Male Seminary, and, of course, informal forms of entertainment, not all of which met the faculty's approval. Girls would sometimes sneak into each other's rooms and hide in the closet in order to talk and sing long after "lights out."⁴⁰ And not a small bit of energy was spent primping, and trying to figure out ways to meet surreptitiously with the boys from the Male Seminary. These were, after all, teenagers.

The debates about the "proper" and "realistic" education for females and for Indians continued throughout the century, both in the United States and Britain, as well as the Cherokee Nation. In the early years of the twentieth century "Domestic Science" and "Household Chemistry" classes brought cleaning, sewing, and cooking into the mainstream of the curriculum, a change spurred on by the Department of the Interior.⁴¹ Still, the school stayed true to its original vision, and instruction remained primarily geared toward scholarship and teaching, rather than labor.

The reason that the Department of the Interior had any say in the matter is that in 1902 the United States government revoked the sovereignty it had promised to the Cherokee Nation, and with it the Cherokees' direct control of their schools.⁴² Finally, in 1909, the students of the Female Seminary joined their male colleagues in the co-education high school which was housed in the building of the former Male Seminary, and the Female Seminary building became part of the campus of the new Northeastern State Normal School, now Northeastern State University.⁴³ The golden era of Cherokee education had come to a close.

³⁸ Ibid., 59.

³⁹ Ibid., 53.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 73.

⁴¹ Ibid., 60-61.

⁴² Ibid., 63-64.

⁴³ Ibid., 69.

Sources

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