

John Jeremiah Read at Spencer Academy

Spencer Academy

In the fall of 1868, the National Council authorized the restoration of Spencer Academy. Superintendent Forbis LeFlore employed Calvin Ervin to do this work. The Irvin family moved into the place and lived there for two years while repairs were being made.¹⁰⁶

On November 2, 1870, the Council designated \$6,000 for the re-establishment of Spencer as a male boarding school. An agreement with the Southern Presbyterian Church, U. S., was drawn up, and Rev. J. H. Colton, who was already residing at Pine Ridge only a few miles away, became Superintendent. In the fall of 1871, the school opened with 31 students.¹⁰⁷

From the beginning Colton had problems, and in October, 1876, the Board of Trustees requested Colton to resign. Teachers -- Miss

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Ibid., Indian Orphan, January, 1925.

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Ibid.

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Christian, "Memories," Chronicles (June, 1931), p. 167; Report of Indian Affairs, 1869, p. 410; 1870, p. 293.

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Acts of the Choctaw Nation, November 2, 1870; October 23, 1871; Hudson, "Recollections," Chronicles (December, 1932), pp. 517-18.

Elizabeth Morrison, Mr. and Mrs. J. L. Caldwell, and Mrs. H. Askill, and later T. J. Johnson -- had not arrived until the fall of 1872, causing delay in starting the work. In December, 1872, two boys died of an unknown sickness, and twelve boys were badly hurt when an upper balcony collapsed. On one occasion, Colton left the school temporarily, plunging it into confusion. In violation of the School Act of 1842, he opened a store near the Academy; he did not admit students approved by the Trustees and expelled others without consulting the authorities.¹⁰⁸

Rev. John Jeremiah Read, originally from Mississippi but directly from the First Presbyterian Church of Houston, followed Colton. With his wife and baby, he reached Spencer in December, 1876, and opened the session on January 1, 1877. Before many months, pneumonia broke out in the school. A number of boys died, including the small daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Read. Because of this experience, Read persuaded the Council to require physical examinations for all students, a policy which became law. Also, due to his urging, the Council passed a law admitting only boys between twelve and eighteen and who had completed the "Third Reader."¹⁰⁹

Read served for five years at Spencer. During his administration many Choctaw boys received instruction at the school -- among them, Peter Hudson, teacher, historian, and consultant for the Oklahoma

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Acts of the Choctaw Nation, November 1, 1872; November 11, 1875; October 22, 1876; Folsom, Constitution and Laws (1869), pp. 78-81; Vindicator, December 6, 1876; Byington to McBeth, dated 1872, Mission and Missionaries, Indian Archives.

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Morrison, Red Man's Trail, p. 78; The Missionary, May, 1877, p. 110; Acts of the Choctaw Nation, October 11, 1877; November 5, 1880; Laws of the Choctaw Nation, October 31, 1890, pp. 41-64; Report of Indian Affairs, 1878, p. 89.

Historical Society for many years, and Silas L. Bacon, the beloved Superintendent of Goodland Indian Orphanage. Read left Spencer in the summer of 1881. The contract with the Southern Presbyterian Church had expired and plans had been made to move the school to another site.

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With the departure of Read, the old buildings ceased to function as Spencer Academy. For two years, the Choctaw Indian Orphanage operated at this place; then, on September 8, 1885, the property was sold to Robert Stewart Frazier, an Indian preacher. Known as Spencerville, a store and post office were established nearby, and eventually Frazier sold usable lumber and building materials out of the old buildings. Today, the Family Frazier Cemetery, the remains of a storage cellar, and the old Spencer Graveyard on the hill may be seen. Little else exists of the old school of which the Choctaws were so proud.

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The site chosen for New Spencer was at Nelson, twenty miles east of the original location. Although Allen Wright suggested a fireproof building, the Council chose to erect a wooden, two-storied structure. Mr. and Mrs. O. P. Stark were recalled to the Nation from

¹¹⁰ Morrison, Red Man's Trail, p. 80; Report of Indian Affairs, 1880, p. 96.

¹¹¹ Acts of the Choctaw Nation, October 25, 1877; November 4, 1880; Acts and Laws, April 2, 1885; Reed, "Robe Family," Chronicles (Autumn, 1948), p. 301; Christian, "Memories," Chronicles (June, 1931), p. 158. The second Mrs. W. E. Schooler of Hugo told the writer of this paper that her husband had bought the building stones of the old school and used them in constructing the fireplace of the Scholar cabin on Pine Lake north of Swink, Oklahoma. (Interview by writer with Mrs. W. E. Schooler of Hugo, Oklahoma, June 3, 1963).

Paris, Texas, Stark assuming his duties in November, 1881. In October, 1882, the school opened with 60 boys. Stark was in poor health, however, and Mrs. Stark assumed more and more authority. He died April 4, 1884, and was buried in the cemetery near the school. For a time, Mrs. Stark stayed on at Spencer, causing a conflict in management; eventually, however, she returned to Paris. She died October 3, 1910. After her death, the children of the Starks had the remains of their father removed from Nelson to rest beside their mother in a cemetery in Paris.¹¹²

The Northern Presbyterian Church, U. S. A., had assumed control of the school at its new location. One of the teachers appointed had been Harvey R. Schermerhorn, who now followed Stark as Superintendent. Like all Superintendents of Spencer, Schermerhorn faced frustrating problems, but he was an able administrator and won the support of the Choctaws. Tom Hunter, a student under him, praised Schermerhorn as a gentleman and an excellent example for young boys; and Superintendent of Schools J. P. Turnbull was Schermerhorn's staunch friend. Of special interest is that, at the suggestion of Turnbull, \$300 was spent for lightening rods. This expenditure indicates that Turnbull, like some other leaders, recognized the

¹¹²Acts of the Choctaw Nation, October 25, 1877; November 4, 1880; November 5, 1881; November 9, 1885; November 10, 1855; Imon, "Nelson," Files of Frances Imon; Report of Allen Wright, December 28, 1880, Wright (Allen) Collection, Western History Collection; Schermerhorn's Account Books, Olinger Collection, Western History Collection; Hogue, Goodland Indian Orphanage, pp. 21-22.

inflammability of the large wooden structure at Spencer.¹¹³

Schermerhorn left Spencer at the close of the spring term, 1888. R. W. Hill assumed temporary control until Alfred Docking arrived in November. Docking was a professional educator. At the close of the school year 1888-89, he reported 86 boys enrolled; four teachers; the highest classes studied Latin, Physical Geography, Algebra, and Physiology. Special methods had been used for boys beginning to learn English. Unfortunately, Docking's accounts were questioned because of an error on the part of R. W. Hill. However, Docking was exonerated, leaving the school in 1891, for personal reasons.¹¹⁴

W. A. Caldwell, also a professional educator and administrator, took Docking's place, arriving in September, 1891. He suggested insurance on the building, and his reports are filled with urgent requests for expanded facilities, including a schoolhouse. In the report of 1892-93, he wrote: "If it is impossible to give us a school building, at any rate give us amounts for mules and a steam laundry. ... This old washboard plan wears out clothes too fast."¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Acts of the Choctaw Nation, November 9, 1881; October 24, 1882; Schermerhorn to Lowrie, June 22, 1883; July 2, 1883; March 13, 1884; March 14, 1884; April 4, 1887; March 5, 1888; American Indian Correspondence, Box 12, Microcopy, Western History Collection; Report of Schermerhorn to Turnbull, 1887-88, Choctaw Schools, Spencer Academy, Indian Archives; Speech by Judge T. W. Hunter, Files of Frances Imon.

¹¹⁴ Acts of the Choctaw Nation, November 16, 1889; October 31, 1890; October 15, 1891; Hill to Schermerhorn, August 7, 1888; Docking to Turnbull, October 13, 1890, Choctaw Schools, Spencer Academy, Indian Archives.

¹¹⁵ Caldwell to Board of Education, October 1 and 7, 1892; August 31, 1893, Choctaw Schools, Spencer Academy, Indian Archives.

¹²¹ibid., Frances Imon, "Spencer Academy," Paris News, March 21, 1967, Files of Frances Imon; Interview by writer with Winnie Spring Griffith, August 10, 1969, Hugo, Oklahoma.

Summary of Choctaw education at Spencer Academy:

After the war, Spencer Academy was not opened until the fall of 1871. Rev. J. H. Colton was appointed superintendent, followed by Rev. John Jeremiah Read. In September, 1881, Spencer Academy opened at a new location southeast of the community of Nelson in the central part of Choctaw County. Rev. and Mrs. O. P. Stark were recalled from Paris, Texas, to superintend the school. At the death of Stark in 1884, Harvey R. Schermerhorn became the new administrator. He was followed by R. W. Hill, Alfred Docking, and W. A. Caldwell. In 1894, the Choctaws took charge of the institution, appointing J. B. Jeter, Choctaw, as administrator. On the night of October 3, 1896, tragedy struck. Spencer Academy burned, killing several boys and injuring many others. The school opened again in the fall of 1898, but this was the last session for the boys of the Choctaw Nation to attend their beloved Spencer Academy.