

## A Look Back: Oklahoma Presbyterian College

You might have noticed our yearly Christmas tree ornament was a beautiful portrait of our current Tribal complex building, once the Oklahoma Presbyterian College. Before we move into our new space in the coming weeks, this month's Iti Fabvssa will highlight the Presbyterian missionary efforts in the Choctaw Nation, honor a lesser known Presbyterian missionary, and take a look back at the history of this building.

Each time we use our Choctaw language dictionary or turn the pages of a Choctaw language bible, we experience the legacy of the Presbyterian mission efforts among the Choctaw people in Mississippi. Beginning in 1818, Presbyterian missionaries were the first to faithfully serve Choctaw people both in Mississippi and in Indian Territory (Heimstra 1949:459). The Methodist mission began in 1827 and the Baptist mission followed in 1830 after removal to Indian Territory. The Presbyterian mission published religious texts in the Choctaw language, along with grammar, spelling, and arithmetic school books, which assisted countless Choctaw children in becoming familiar with these subjects. The Presbyterian mission among the Choctaw people did not end after removal. In fact, after missionaries accompanied Choctaw people along the Trail of Tears to Indian Territory, new mission sites dotted the landscape very soon after their arrival. Choctaw people, just as in our homeland, wanted the focus to be on educating our youth. So the Presbyterian mission concentrated their attention on building schools. First with the Wheelock Academy in 1832, then, other smaller mission schools. Between 1870 and 1890, increasing support for mission schools dominated the Presbyterian mission focus.

The Oklahoma Presbyterian College was the end result of long term goal of a series of pioneer Presbyterian missionaries that would become the board of managers: W. J. B. Lloyd, C. J. Ralston, J. J. Read, and Judge James H. Franklin. R.R. Halsell purchased a small tract of land from Dixon Durant, a Choctaw tribal member. At this location, Halsell built a two story frame school building known as Halsell hall in 1892, but this wasn't big enough to support a growing school. This land was sold to a Scottish Presbyterian missionary, Calvin James Ralston. Days before the purchase was finalized, Ralston was addressing the Choctaw Nation Tribal Council when a telegram arrived informing him that his youngest son, Calvin Jr., drowned tragically that morning. Ralston used a \$256.56 donation from the young boy's grandmother and \$888.50 from the Executive Committee of Home Missions to construct the Calvin Institute in his memory,

which opened in 1894. It was such a success that it was closed, expanded, and reopened as the Durant Presbyterian College in 1896. Despite initial success, the Durant Presbyterian College stood to close its doors early for lack of enrollment.



It was the hard work and insight of a lesser known Presbyterian missionary, Mary Semple, which saved the college from closure. A young missionary of 19 years old, she began to serve in Indian Territory in 1857. Within her first year of teaching at Wheelock Academy, she managed a full classroom of Choctaw students, helped each of the students learn English, and she became fluent in the Choctaw language. The next year, Mary relocated to the Bennington Mission Station and served under Ebenezer Hotchkin, Sr.. Here, she met her husband, Henry Hotchkin. They would go on to serve several missions in Indian Territory and have twelve children. She was a devoted school teacher, often teaching classes with her own babies in her lap as their family grew. It was Mary's dedication that saved the college in 1896, when she stepped in to reform the curriculum. Her devotion to teaching is heard in her words, "the best heritage you can leave your children is trained hearts and minds" (Hotchkin 1957:15).

From then on, under the direction of Mary's son, Ebenezer Hotchkin, Jr., the college offered standard courses and swelled to an enrollment of 315 students. Since the Durant Presbyterian College stood to continue to grow, the school would need more space. After expansion, Oklahoma Presbyterian College for Girls opened in 1910 as a combination dormitory and all-in-one school plant. It originally had a fourth floor, but was damaged in a fire in 1941. It was reconstructed without the top story.

It served as a four year degree institution offering three degrees in Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Literature, and Bachelor of Science. The students participated in many social engagements including parties, teas, luncheons, dramatic performances, recitals, and class competitions in athletics and academics. They enjoyed two swimming pools located in the basement. While students swam in one pool, the other was cleaned. In 1916, these degrees were reduced to three years and by 1920 the institution reduced its status to a junior college. As the school fell on financially hard times, in 1935, the Oklahoma Presbyterian College focused on religious and music education for students and made arrangements with Southeastern State College to oversee the rest of the curriculum for their students. In 1951, the OPC became co-educational, but by 1966 the rising cost of higher education finally forced the college to close its doors. It was left vacant and fell into disrepair until 1975.

In 1975, the building began to serve the community in a number of ways. First, as the Oklahoma Presbyterian Center, then as a head start, day care center, and other welfare services. Also in 1975, the Red River Valley Historical Society purchased the building to use as its headquarters and regional museum, with Mary Claude Parks tasked with curation. It was located in the basement, from where the ICW offices are to what used to be the small conference room. Just south of the museum, was an open space where beading, painting and other craft classes were held along with a gift shop, both managed by Julia Knight, a descendant of Ann Semple. This same year, Chief Clark David Gardner of the Choctaw Nation moved Choctaw Nation's administrative offices from the Montgomery Ward building in downtown Durant to this building. A nomination for the National Register of Historic Places was approved for listing in 1976.

Gradually, Choctaw Nation offices started filling the building and in the 1990s when head start, the day care center, and other welfare services moved from the building, add-on buildings began to be built to accommodate our growing needs. First with Finance, then Membership and the Bishinik newspaper, now Biskinik. Now, every room of the former school is occupied with employees serving the tribe. As we move to our new complex building, let us take time to reflect on the rich history of the OPC building. The author would like to thank Justin Banks, Judy Allen, and Jerry Tomlinson for their enthusiastic support and assistance with this article; they were immensely helpful.

## Resources

Allen, Judy. Historic Projects Officer, Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.

Burke Library Archives of Columbia University, [http://lindquist.cul.columbia.edu/catalog/burke\\_lindq\\_055\\_1160](http://lindquist.cul.columbia.edu/catalog/burke_lindq_055_1160)

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<https://saylingaway.wordpress.com/2017/03/>

Hiemstra, William L. "Presbyterian Mission Schools among the Choctaws and Chickasaws," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 27 (Spring 1949).

OPC archival collection. Austin College. Courtesy of Justin Banks, Head of Special Collections and Records Management; College Archivist/Associate Professor.

National Register Properties in Oklahoma: Oklahoma Presbyterian College

Semple, Anne. *Ties That Bind: The Story of the Oklahoma Presbyterian College*. In *Indian of North America*. n.p., n.d., ca. 1957.

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