



## NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

### The Meta Chestnutt Sager Collection

*By Linda D. Wilson*

Early pioneers of the short-lived community of Silver City, Chickasaw Nation, welcomed the tall, willowy, dark-haired young lady from North Carolina who came to open a Christian school in Indian Territory. On September 4, 1889, she arrived by train in Oklahoma City, a rag-tag town of tents and shacks that had come into existence on April 22, 1889, following a land run to open the area known as the Unassigned Lands. Meta Chestnutt was met by Silver City residents W. J. Erwin and his wife. Chestnutt stayed at the Grand Avenue Hotel, her room a lean-to with a hole in the wall for a window. The next day she and the Erwins traveled by wagon, following cow trails and crossing the rushing waters of the Canadian River, to Silver City, situated on the river's southern bank. The community was a stopping point for cattle drives along the Chisholm Trail and was served by a post office from May 29, 1883, to June 17, 1890. "Neither land hunting nor man hunting," Meta Chestnutt had arrived at her destination.<sup>1</sup>

Upon reaching Silver City on September 8, 1889, she began teaching at a schoolhouse that had been built by a few cattlemen. Prominent ranchers in the area were Charles Bryant Campbell, Montford Johnson and his son E. B., and James "Uncle Jimmy" Bond. Initially seven pupils attended the little schoolhouse built of lumber hauled from Denison, Texas. When the Chicago, Kansas and Nebraska Railway (acquired by Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railway in 1891) bypassed Silver City, the residents moved west to Minco and celebrated the occasion on July 4, 1890, with a barbecue and dance performance by American Indians from the nearby reservation. In Minco the Bond family and others helped Chestnutt establish the

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*Meta Chestnutt  
in the early  
1900s (OHS  
Research  
Division photo).*

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El Meta Bond College on lots at Third and Pontotoc Streets on the northwest side of town.<sup>2</sup>

Born on a plantation on September 8, 1863, in Lenoir County, North Carolina, Meta Chestnutt was the daughter of Lemuel Allen and Almeda Nobles Chestnutt. She received her early education at private academies, graduating from Bethel Academy on June 30, 1884. Attending Peabody Normal College in Nashville, Tennessee, Chestnutt completed course work that prepared her to become a teacher. Following her graduation from that institution in 1888, she taught at Greenville Institute (probably in North Carolina) before coming to Indian Territory in September 1889.<sup>3</sup>

Bits and pieces of Meta Chestnutt's interesting and challenging life are contained in a small collection (2007.88) in the Oklahoma Historical Society's Research Division archive. There is one document box and one oversized box. The document box contains eighteen file folders in which there is correspondence, a 203-page, typed manuscript titled "Born to Meet Adversity (and Rise Above It)," a 1902 El Meta Bond College event program, and Chestnutt's autograph books dating from 1885 and 1892. Of importance are letters dating from January 1940 to December 1945, which Chestnutt

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wrote to her great-niece Eva Heiliger, who resided in Silverdale, Washington. Gleaning information from Chestnutt and other family members, Heiliger wrote the manuscript "Born to Meet Adversity (and Rise Above It)" about her great-aunt and hoped to have it published or turned into a screenplay by the Bob Jones University, a Christian institution located in Greenville, South Carolina. Unsuccessful in finding a publisher, Heiliger kept the manuscript. The correspondence also remained with Heiliger, and her daughter, Marilyn Heiliger McGinnis, donated the items to the Oklahoma Historical Society in 2006.

The oversized box holds three items. Of significance is original sheet music for "My Sweetheart's Other Beau," published in 1906 by Carl Fisher of New York City. Meta Chestnutt wrote the lyrics (originally a poem she had written by the same title), and her husband J. (John) Alba Sager composed the piece. Also in the oversized box are an original copy of Section D of the *Daily Oklahoman* dated August 27, 1939, which featured an account of Meta Chestnutt and the building of the El Meta Bond Academy, and an original of the *Minco Minstrel* dated September 7, 1939, which announced the fiftieth anniversary of the school's founding.

Heiliger's manuscript presents a chronological story of her great-aunt's life from her arrival in Indian Territory to her death at age eighty-four on January 8, 1948. Each chapter is headed with some of Meta Chestnutt Sager's favorite quotations that came from her scrapbook dated July 6, 1893. Included in the manuscript are transcripts of some of her poetry, including "My Sweetheart's Other Beau," which her husband suggested should be set to music.<sup>4</sup>

Through Chestnutt's letters to her great-niece the reader learns about her maternal and paternal grandfathers, both of whom lived in North Carolina and owned slaves. Chestnutt relates that her father disliked the gentry who rode fine horses and came to the Chestnutt plantation to drink homemade apple and peach brandy and to eat sumptuous meals prepared by his mother, who oversaw the household servants. Chestnutt's father was in charge of the slaves who worked in the fields. When her father married Almeda Nobles, grandfather Chestnutt gave them a farm for a wedding gift. On that farm in Lenoir County, North Carolina, Meta and her three siblings lived in a four-room farmhouse. Chestnutt stated that the house had a front porch, called a piazza, and that the kitchen was kept in a separate building, away from the house, as was the custom in that day. The house's garret served as Meta's playhouse. She and her childhood friend Lucy Roundtree would ride mules, climb trees,



and play in the cornfields, all the while traveling to imaginary, far-away places to meet kings and queens. Chestnutt's parents and sister Martha were buried on the home place.<sup>5</sup>

Poetry and her Christian upbringing called her from her comfortable southern lifestyle and her engagement to Marshall Taylor in North Carolina to the intrepid, unknown part of the West known as Indian Territory. Despite pleas from her mother to stay at home and become a genteel southern lady who would use a parasol to protect her ivory skin from the sun, Chestnutt knew that God was calling her to establish a Christian school for American Indians and whites. At an early age she had read "The Lake of Dismal Swamp" by Thomas More. She was stirred by More's poem about the plight of a young man who searched for his beloved Indian maiden. Chestnutt disliked the treatment that American Indians had received at the hand of the whites in their quest for land. She had pored over published material about the Trail of Tears and had read about the fate of the Indians in Indian Territory after the Civil war, during Reconstruction. When her great-niece questioned Sager about why she had come to Indian Territory, she replied that her life's purpose "was to found a school and develop it into a real college, coeducational, for that is God's plan for the human family, in which Indians and whites should have equal opportunities. I made



*Meta Sager with horse Old Faithful Chub and John Alba Sager with Bryan the dog (OHS Research Division photo).*

no plans for negroes to attend white schools as was even then [*sic*] in Kansas.” This she accomplished with the establishment of El Meta Bond College in Minco, Indian Territory.<sup>6</sup>

A number of townspeople and cattlemen contributed four hundred dollars toward the construction of the new school in Minco. Because the building originally also served as a church, the usual custom of holding a big dance at the opening of a new structure was dismissed. Known as Sunny South, the edifice continued as an educational facility until the three-story El Meta Bond College opened in October 1894. Situated near the original school, that institution remained open until May 28, 1920. When it closed, approximately twenty-five hundred students, American Indians and whites, had passed through its doors. Meta Chestnutt accomplished her wishes of having an educational facility available to Indians in Indian Territory so that they would not need to send their children to eastern schools. Chickasaw and Choctaw students boarded at the school. She worked mainly with children of intermarried Chickasaw and Choctaw. Students received instruction in the manual arts, domestic science, and fine arts. A band and orchestra conducted by J. Alba Sager, whom Chestnutt hired in 1904, offered musical programs for

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Minco residents. Describing him as "handsome, a talented musician, and a gentleman of fine qualities," Chesnutt married Sager on May 6, 1906, in Bellafontaine, Ohio, where his parents lived.<sup>7</sup>

As public schools opened offering free education, the Sagers had fewer paying students and eventually had financial difficulties in keeping the school open. As they were about to close the facility in 1920, a Mr. Kenneth arrived in Minco. He brought letters of introduction from mutual friends of the Sagers who claimed to know him and to hold him in high esteem. Kenneth approached the Sagers and asked that they not close the school. He stated that he was an ordained minister and that he had teaching experience in a Christian college. He explained to them that he could not buy their facility at that time but planned to purchase it in the future. With high hopes of saving the college, the Sagers had almost agreed to allow Kenneth to take over as administrator and teacher. He claimed to have no desire to change the established curriculum and stated that he had enough money saved to operate for one year. At that time, he hoped to have the college back on a paying basis, and all three of them could realize an income.<sup>8</sup>

Having made plans to close the school, the Sagers had decided to move to Chickasha and to seek employment at the Oklahoma College for Women (now University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma). However, before they moved and before a final arrangement had been made with Kenneth, Meta Sager developed pneumonia. Under doctor's orders she remained in bed, clinging to life for three months. Not wanting to burden his wife with school matters, Alba Sager made a gentleman's agreement with Kenneth. No formal papers were drawn. By December 1920 Sager had regained her health only to learn that the doctor had forbid her to enter the race for county superintendent of schools. But other news was more devastating. The Sagers soon learned that they had been duped by a confidence man. Their friend James Bond told them that Kenneth was not teaching Bible studies, nor was he saying grace when the students assembled for meals. In addition, he had been buying items for the school and charging the purchases to the Sagers. When Kenneth started passing checks signed first by Alba and then by Meta during her illness, the townspeople became suspicious. They investigated and learned that Kenneth was a known forger. He had run up a debt of \$100,000 by purchasing thoroughbred horses and supposedly selling them for profit to benefit the school. Bond loaned the Sagers the money to repay the debt, and they eventually paid him back when they sold the land on which the school stood.<sup>9</sup>



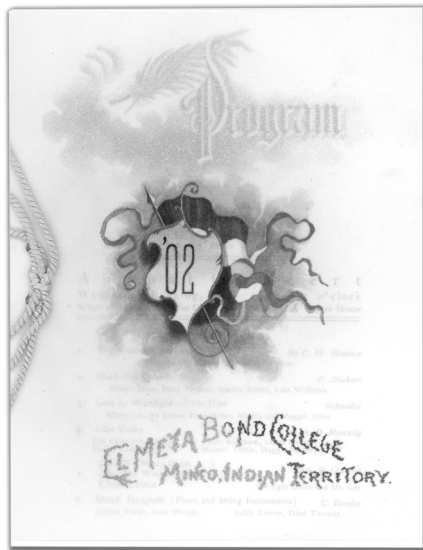
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*Above: El Meta Bond College, Minco, Oklahoma, in winter (OHS Research Division photo).*

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After settling in Chickasha, Alba Sager supplemented his income from the Oklahoma College for Women by giving private music lessons. Meta would soon suffer a heart attack, possibly brought on by the worry of repaying the debt created by Kenneth. As she recuperated in the hospital, Alba was bursting with pride to tell her about the plan that he had made for them to take a trip. Several years earlier a man had approached Alba with an investment plan that was guaranteed to double or triple their money. As Alba was about to tell Meta about the money he had invested so that they could have a vacation, the investor notified him that instead of making money, Sager now owed twice the amount he had invested. After explaining to Meta about the failed investment plan and telling her that they now owed \$11,000, he asked for her forgiveness. Shocked by the news, she was unable to speak at first but eventually told Alba that she forgave him. Guilt ridden by having made two bad financial decisions, he wrote her a note stating that he was going to friends who lived in Oregon. He left her his watch and a few possessions that she could sell in order to have money. He also promised to send her money after he secured a job.<sup>10</sup>

During his seven-month absence Sager sent his wife one check. She had his address, but initially she refused to write to him and ask him to come back. She eventually wrote a poem entitled "Is It Worth the Cost?" in which she asks him not to stay away too long, says that life's burdens are lighter when two work together, and suggests that it was God's plan for them to be together. Having signed the poem, and enclosing no letter with it, she mailed the verse to Alba. Moved by her words, he soon returned home. However, he continued to worry about not being a better provider. When Alba Sager died of a heart attack on September 26, 1930, the doctor told Meta that he believed the malady may have been caused by some inner tension or unhappiness. Following her husband's death, Meta Sager sold their house and bought a small bungalow, which she called "the house beside the road." She became assistant cataloger in the library at the Oklahoma College for Women. In addition, she sold life insurance for extra income, so that she could repay the debt caused by Alba's unwise investment decision.<sup>11</sup>

Through the years Meta Sager continued to be remembered by former students and acquaintances. In 1936 she gave a speech at the dedication of the Minco National Guard Armory, which had been constructed on the land where the El Meta Bond College once stood. Three years later, on her seventy-sixth birthday Minco's citizens put together a two-day celebration, a golden jubilee in recogni-





*Meta Sager in the dress she wore to her induction into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame (OHS Research Division photo).*

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tion of the opening of her first school in Silver City in 1889. In 1939 she was also honored by being inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame. After receiving the letter inviting her to the Hall of Fame banquet at the Biltmore Hotel in Oklahoma City, Sager dispatched a note to her niece, Maybelle Chestnutt Snidow, in West Virginia. Without directly asking her niece to come, she got the point across. Snidow arrived in time to assist her aunt during the train trip from Chickasha to Oklahoma City. Decker in a long, black velvet dress with gray and black beads at the neckline, Meta Sager was escorted by her former student Reford Bond to the hotel ballroom. In 1943 Chickasha businessmen conveyed on her the title “Chickasha’s Sweetheart.”<sup>12</sup>

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CHICKASHA, OKLAHOMA

1525 S. 7th St.,  
March 5, 1943

Dear Eva,

Your good cake arrived exactly on time for Valentine's Day, and I am stringing it along so that I still have a good piece left. It gets better with age. I came in perfect condition as good as if it had been mailed right here in Chickasha. Thank you a lot.

I wrote you a letter last Sunday, but the weather has been very bad again and I have not felt very well, the cold gets me, so the letter lay back on my desk so long that I am writing a new one since your article came over the radio this morning, and the Chickasha Express gave notice of it on the front page. I did not hear it for I have no radio. The College folks made quite a "splutter" over it, especially our office force. The orchid has not yet arrived but the broadcast said it is on the way. I am proud of you, Eva, tell me what you wrote, I am anxious to know. Tell me about the "Good Neighbor" contest, I did not know anything about it. I shall wear my orchid with great delight and tell the folks who you are. The papa said you lived in Silverdale, Oregon and was a reporter for the Dremerton Herald. Is that the name of the paper for which you write?

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Like other Americans during World War II, Meta Sager experienced wartime rationing. In one of her letters to her great-niece she related how she made her own soap because Uncle Sam allowed individuals to buy only three bars of soap at a time. In preparation of her soap making she dug up seven pounds of old, rancid lard that she had discarded. She bought enough additional shortening to make two boxes of lye. On the second batch she lacked enough shortening, so she added butter. She wrote, "We can do without butter but you have *got to have soap* [emphasis by Sager]." Sager added oil of lilac and stated that her soap smelled "high."<sup>13</sup>

Meta Sager continued to live in her house beside the road until her death. In her later years, despite ill health, she valiantly tried to keep working at the Oklahoma College for Women. Neighbors would come to visit and occasionally bring her a meal. In September 1947 she broke her hip and was hospitalized. While in the hospital, she contracted pneumonia and suffered a heart attack. She never fully recovered, and she passed away on January 8, 1948. She was buried next to her husband in Rosehill Cemetery in Chickasha, Oklahoma.<sup>14</sup>

Meta Chestnutt Sager met life's challenges with courage and determination. As a young girl she defied the social mores by attending a normal school to become a teacher rather than attending a girls' academy to become a genteel southern lady. Despite pleas from her family the young, single, twenty-six-year-old woman traveled from her familiar surroundings in North Carolina to the wilds of Indian Territory to fulfill what she believed was God's plan for her—to establish a Christian school for American Indians and whites.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> From page 5 of letter, Meta Chestnutt Sager to Eva Heiliger, September 3, 1944, Folder 10, Box 1, Meta Chestnutt Sager Collection, Research Division, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City [hereafter cited as MCSC]; *Daily Oklahoman* (Oklahoma City), August 27, 1939; Meta C. Sager, "Early Grady County History," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 17 (June 1939): 184; Kathi Thacker, "Silver City: Gone Not Forgotten," *Daily Oklahoman*, December 31, 1982; John W. Morris, *Ghost Towns of Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977); George Shirk, *Oklahoma Place Names* (2d ed.; Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> Sager, "Early Grady County History," 187; *Daily Oklahoman*, August 27, 1939; *Minco* (Oklahoma) *Minstrel*, September 7, 1939; Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Minco, Oklahoma, March 1896; Eva Heiliger to Reford Bond, February 8, 1980, and Bond to Heiliger, March 6, 1980, Folder 2, Box 1, MCSC. This Reford Bond is the great-grandson of James Henry and Adelaide (Johnson) Bond, who helped Chestnutt establish the college in Minco, Indian Territory.

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<sup>3</sup> Meta Chestnutt Sager to Eva Heiliger, March 22, 1943, Folder 10, Box 1, MCSC; U.S. Census, Contentnea Neck, Lenoir County, North Carolina, 1870. The 1870 census gives the mother's name as Almeter and Meta's as Almeter. Siblings include Isaac, age eighteen, and Mary, age twelve. Eva Heiliger, "Born to Meet Adversity (and Rise Above It) [typescript]," "Chronology" and 6-7, Folder 6, Box 1, MCSC.

<sup>4</sup> Heiliger, "Born to Meet Adversity," 129-31, Folders 6 and 7, Box 1, MCSC.

<sup>5</sup> Sager to Heiliger, March 22, 1943, and September 3, 1944, Folder 10, Box 1, MCSC.

<sup>6</sup> Sager to Heiliger, September 3, 1944, Folder 10, Box 1, MCSC; Heiger, "Born to Meet Adversity," typescript, 10-13, Folder 6, Box 1, MCSC.

<sup>7</sup> Sager, "Early Grady County History," 188; Meta Chestnutt Sager Questionnaire, "Indian-Pioneer History," 76: 476-77, microfilm, Research Division, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City; *Daily Oklahoman*, January 10, 1948; Heiliger, "Born to Meet Adversity," "Chronology," and 116, Folders 6 and 7, Box 1, MCSC. Apparently J. Alba Sager not only taught music but also owned and operated a confectionary and café in Minco, Oklahoma. See Dixie Gilbert, *Minco, Oklahoma, 1890-1990: The First 100 Years* (Rich Hill, Mo.: Bell Books, n.d.), 52, and *Oklahoma State Gazetteer and Business Directory* (Detroit, Mich.: R. L. Polk and Co., 1909 and 1911).

<sup>8</sup> Heiliger, "Born to Meet Adversity," 145-49, Folder 7, Box 1, MCSC.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 150-58.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 159, 161, 163-64.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 164-68; Sager to Heiliger, April 11, 1943.

<sup>12</sup> Heiliger, "Born to Meet Adversity," 169-92, Folder 7, Box 1; Sager to Heiliger, March 5, 1943, Folder 10, Box 1, MCSC; *Minco Minstrel*, September 7, 1939. The Minco Armory (NR 94000484) was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1994.

<sup>13</sup> Sager to Heiliger, September 3, 1944, Folder 10, Box 1, MCSC.

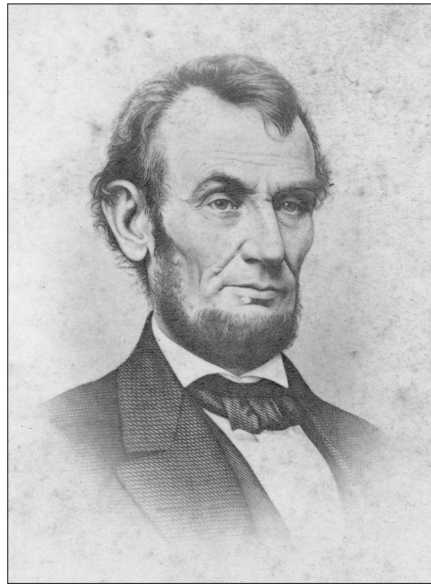
<sup>14</sup> *Daily Oklahoman*, January 10, 1948; Letter Chestnutt to Heiliger, February 17, 1940, Folder 10, Box 1; Lucille ? [Sager's neighbor] to Eva Heiliger, February 4, 1948, Folder 11, Box 1, MCSC. This eleven-page letter gives information regarding the instructions that Sager had written regarding the disposition of her estate. The letter gives a list of specific clothing and household items that went to named relatives, friends, and religious organizations. Sager also left directions for her funeral service.

## Lincoln's Legacy in Oklahoma

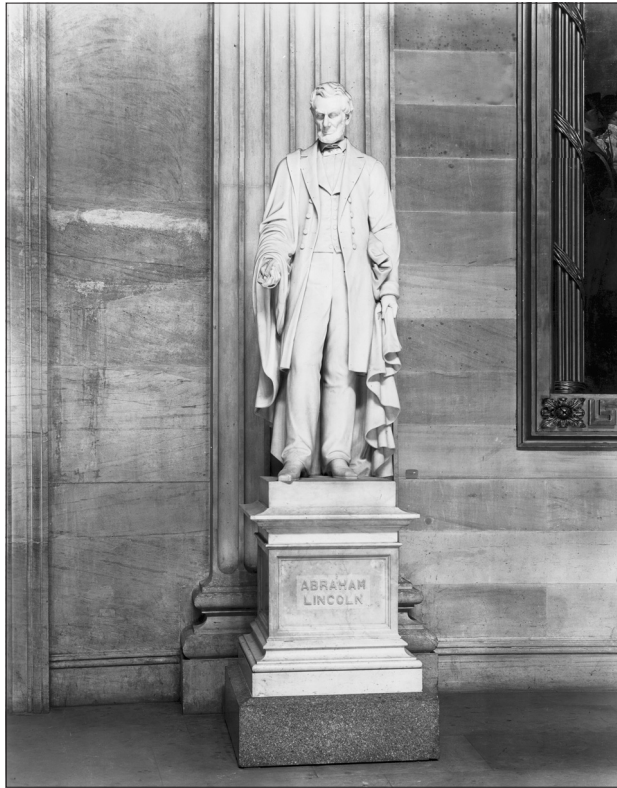
*by Richard Sias and Bob L. Blackburn*

The State of Oklahoma joins the rest of the nation in celebrating the legacy of Abraham Lincoln during the bicentennial of his birth on February 12, 1809. Through educational programs, speeches, publications, and performances, we hope to raise awareness of Lincoln's impact on our history and the relevance of his message for our lives today.

The Oklahoma Historical Society will emphasize three aspects of Lincoln's legacy. The first is his leadership during the Civil War. In Oklahoma, then called the Indian Territory, more than eighty engagements were fought between the North and South. Each of the Five Civilized Tribes, comprising the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, and Seminole, signed treaties of alliance with the South in 1861 but eventually fought on both sides of the conflict. The larg-



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*Statue of Abraham Lincoln, by Oklahoma sculptor Vinnie Ream Hoxie, commissioned by Congress for the Capitol rotunda in Washington, D.C. (OHS Research Division photo).*

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est of the engagements, the “battle” of Honey Springs, fought on July 17, 1863, involved Union, Confederate, and Indian troops as well as the First Kansas Colored Regiment, the second African American unit to be organized after President Lincoln authorized his commanders to recruit and arm black men.

Lincoln’s legacy is also evident in the story of emancipation and the struggle for civil rights. Beginning with the history of the First Kansas Colored Regiment and its successors, the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry, Oklahoma was the only part of the Old South where Lincoln’s promise of “forty acres and a mule” for former slaves was ful-



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filled. Through the Reconstruction Treaties of 1866 former slaves and their descendants received allotments of tribal lands prior to 1907 and statehood. This concentration of African American farmers and ranchers created more than thirty All-Black Towns that prospered and survived well into the twentieth century. As in the rest of the country, Lincoln's message of hope and reconciliation for African Americans would be tested many times in Oklahoma amidst lynching, race riots, abridgment of civil rights, and a struggle for equal opportunity.

Oklahoma's development as a territory of the United States is in many ways attributable to the Homestead Act, passed by Congress in 1862. Whereas many western states can claim Lincoln's promise of free land as their own heritage, Oklahoma is the only state in the Union where the Homestead Act was implemented primarily through land runs. The first of these took place on April 22, 1889, when more than fifty thousand land-hungry pioneers from all walks of life competed for free land in the central part of the present state. Other runs followed in 1891, 1892, and 1893. The hope and drama of those events, combined with the promise of new opportunity for all men regardless of race or economic status, imprinted on the Sooner State a personality that still affects public life in the twenty-first century.

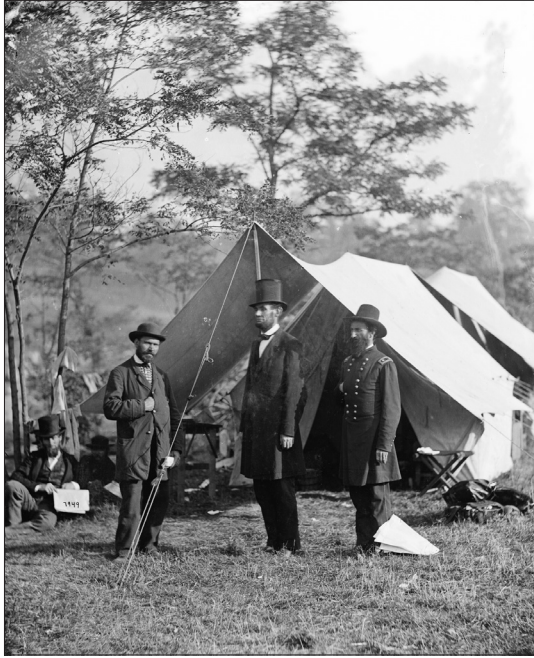
The Oklahoma Lincoln Bicentennial Committee has launched several programs to draw attention to the legacies of the nation's sixteenth president. The OHS will distribute to schools an educational curriculum unit with lesson plans and a video disk featuring a presentation by Dr. Rufus Fears, a noted historian who specializes in the message of freedom. Additional recognition of Lincoln's legacy will be offered in a special museum exhibit at the Oklahoma History Center, through programming on public television and radio, and in a series of humanities lectures offered by scholars across the state.

Lincoln's legacy will never be forgotten. His dreams, his sacrifices, and his leadership improved the world around us. The qualities that made him great are needed more than ever in the rapidly changing world of the twenty-first century.

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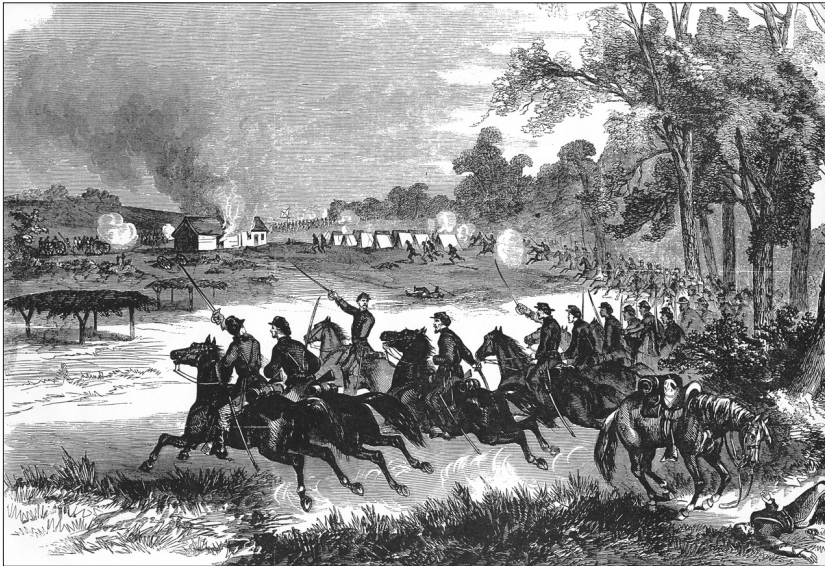


*President Abraham Lincoln and Federal officers at Antietam, October 1862 (A. Gardner photo, courtesy Library of Congress, 04339u[1]).*

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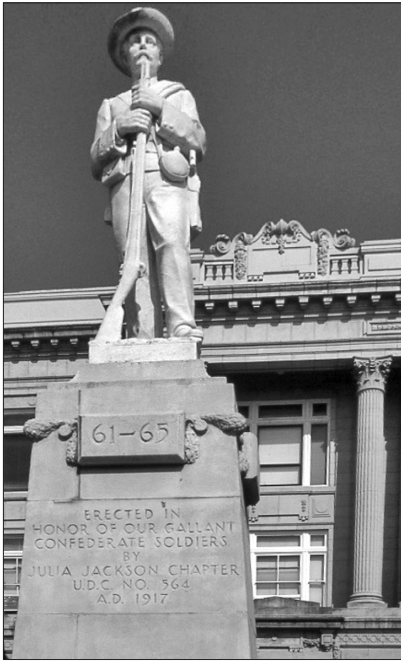
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*The Battle of Honey Springs, as portrayed in Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, August 28, 1863.*

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*Confederate  
Monument in Durant,  
Oklahoma (OHS Research  
Division photo).*

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