

THE COLORED HIGH SCHOOL OF THE CHEROKEE NATION

By T. L. Ballenger

About six miles northwest of Tahlequah on a little knoll overlooking two of the most beautiful springs of clear sparkling water in Eastern Oklahoma are to be found the ruins of a forgotten enterprise of the Cherokee Nation. On this spot once lived a slaveholder named Webber, and tradition has it that Mrs. Webber and her favorite servant Martha buried the family treasures here to hide them from the "secesh" raiders in the War between the States. Whether there is any truth in this tradition or not it evidently possessed the minds of certain earlier desperadoes, for some of the immense hewn sandstone slabs that encased the graves of the Webber family have been turned topsy-turvy and the graves rifled.

The Cherokees had a Negro problem as well as did the white people of the United States and no Freedmen's Bureaus were located here to help in its solution. One phase of this problem was the education of the former colored slaves of Cherokee citizens. The Nation had primary schools which the Negro could attend but, for a long time, no provision was made for his higher training. The Cherokees had had their two well organized and well conducted seminaries for higher education of their own boys and girls for over forty years before any provision was made for the higher education of the colored people, former slaves and their children, in the Nation.

Some advocates of the rights of the Cherokee freedman doubtless had a sincere interest in his educational advancement and urged the Nation to provide facilities for it. Had the needs of the Negro not fitted in with the ambitions of a political party, the humanitarian element alone might never have accomplished their desires. Up to near the last decade of the Nineteenth Century the National Party in the Cherokee Nation had been predominantly successful in keeping the reins of government firmly in its hands. The Downing Party saw in the Negro school question an opportunity to win the vote of the Negroes and their Cherokee sympathizers, and was not slow to take advantage of its opportunity. This is not the only case in American history of a political party's bidding for the Negro vote. The Downing party made the establishment of a high school for the colored people the chief issue of its campaign in the fall of 1887, and won. Hence, with the inauguration of Joel B. Mayes in January, 1888, the administration was pledged to establish for the Negro people an educational institution where their children could go beyond the mere rudiments of a primary education.

With the election of the Downing Party governmental machinery was immediately set in motion for the construction of a high school building. In November, 1888, the Cherokee National Council authorized its erection and appropriated \$10,000 to pay for it. An attempt was made to have the school located at Bartlesville but enterprising citizens of Tahlequah prevented this and got it located near the National capital. At this time "Double Springs", some six miles northwest of Tahlequah, was on the main road connecting Vinita, Salina, Locust Grove, Peggs, Gideon, and Tahlequah. A mercantile establishment had been maintained here for several years. Besides, there two strong springs furnished an excellent water supply for such an institution, and it was surrounded by a valley well adapted to agriculture and horticulture. The citizens of Tahlequah raised a fund of four hundred dollars to pay for the improvements already on this site. Under date of February 1, 1889, for the consideration of \$400.00, Octavia Hartness and Buck Hartness "deeded" the Double Springs place to J. B. Stapler, T. J. Adair, J. W. McSpadden, D. W. Wilson, W. W. Ross, and others, "citizens of the Cherokee Nation and residents of Tahlequah District." This group of citizens in turn deeded it, on the same day, to H. L. Landrum, W. T. Duel, and Joel Baugh in trust for the Cherokee Nation, the consideration being that the "Colored High School" should be built thereon.¹

The contract for the building was awarded to Robert D. Knight of Vinita. Minutely detailed specifications were drawn up for the building and its equipment for school purposes. The main building was to be 48 x 50 feet with kitchen and dining room 16 x 50 feet, three stories high, made of good brick, with a stone foundation, and shingle, mansard and metal roof. A cellar was constructed under a part of the building. It contained about twenty rooms. The first floor consisted of a living room, a dining room and kitchen, a store room, an office, and a school room. The second floor was used mainly for the girls' quarters, and the third floor for the boys. A somewhat comprehensive list of furnishings was included in the specifications suitable for general housekeeping and dormitory purposes.² The

¹ *Cherokee Files*, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City.

² The following list of equipment was to be installed: 36 wood bedsteads, 36 moss mattresses, 18 stand tables, 72 stool chairs, 18 wash stands, 24 good cedar buckets, 24 wash pans, 24 tin dippers, 24 lamps and chimneys, 2 4-light chandeliers, 10 lamps with reflectors and chimneys, 18 slop pails, 6 wash bowls and pitchers, 18 large thunder-mugs, 4 dining tables to seat twelve persons each, 52 dining room chairs, 4 40-inch box stoves for school and dining rooms, 18 24-inch box stoves for other rooms, 1 large cook stove with reservoir, 5 doz. queensware china plates, 5 doz. heavy glass half pint tumblers, 2 large office chairs, 1 carpet for reception room, 12 cane bottom chairs, 1 chandelier, 1 round center table, 1 fancy looking-glass 24 x 36 in., 1 doz. cloth window shades with patent rollers, stove pipe with stoves, 1 doz. large flesh forks, 1 doz. basting spoons, 18 looking glasses 16 x 20 in., 1 large flour and meal chest, 1 table for kitchen, 1 cupboard for kitchen, 1 cupboard for dining room, 2 privies 7 x 14 ft., 5 doz. knives and forks, 5 doz. teaspoons, 5 doz. table spoons, 5 doz. imported China tea cups and saucers, ½ doz. copper bottom teapots, ½ doz.

bricks for the building were burned a short distance east of the site of the structure. The building was erected in the year 1889 and was ready for occupancy January 1, 1890.

COLORED HIGH SCHOOL

In his third annual message, in 1889, Chief Joel B. Mayes said:

"This institution is about finished, as provided by an act of the National Council at its last session, and now, to fit it up for what it is intended, it becomes necessary to make an appropriation to supply the Institution and to carry on the school. I therefore respectfully recommend that you make the necessary appropriations and general provision for the management of this Institution. It should be a source of gratification to the Cherokee people that the feeling of race prejudice is fast dying out, and that the Cherokee Government can fully and cheerfully award to all of its citizens the rights and privileges that belong to them, and the Cherokee people, as one harmonious whole, can today, with one common impulse say that this is my own country, for whose defense I pledge my life, service and sacred honor."

The laws of the Cherokee Nation placed the school under the general supervision of the Superintendent of Education, along with that of the Cherokee male and female seminaries. The Superintendent of Education was superseded, a little later, by a Board of Education, consisting of three members. It was the Superintendent's duty to "prescribe and enforce a series of uniform text books"; "to make requisition on the executive department for funds" as needed, "to appoint teachers"; and to "have complete supervision and control" of the school, subject to such restrictions and direction as might be imposed by law.³ All needed funds were to be drawn from the public treasury by warrant of the Principal Chief based upon requisition of the Superintendent and accompanied by an itemized estimate showing the purpose of such expenditure. Teachers' salaries were to be paid in the same way.⁴ The Superintendent was required to visit the school at least twice a term. The school year was to consist of two terms, one of twenty weeks and the other of sixteen weeks.⁵ Each pupil paid five dollars per month for board. This payment was raised in 1893 to seven dollars and fifty cents. It was the duty of the steward to see that the money was paid. If any student failed to pay, the law instructed the Superintendent to dismiss him from school.⁶ The average attendance had to be kept up

copper bottom coffee pots, 2 doz. pint tin cups, 1 doz. quart tin cups, 5 sets of carving knives and forks, 4 castors of 5 bottles each, 1 doz. large granite iron meat dishes, 1 doz. small granite iron meat dishes, 1 doz. 1-gal. granite iron water pitchers, 1 doz. large deep granite iron dishes, 1 doz. small granite iron dishes, 5 doz. quart granite iron bowls, 5 doz. granite iron soup plates, 1 doz. granite iron sugar bowls, 1 doz. granite iron cream pitchers, 1 doz. heavy glass molasses jugs, 1 doz. cut glass salts.

³ *Constitution and Laws of the Cherokee Nation*, 1892, Ch. X, Art. I, p. 270.

⁴ *Constitution and Laws of the Cherokee Nation*, 1892, Ch. X, Art. I, p. 271.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 274.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 276.

to twenty-five under penalty of discontinuance of the school. The steward was authorized to contract for all necessary wood not furnished the school by the High Sheriff. Teachers had to pay board at the same rate as the pupils.⁷

Supplies for the school were purchased at wholesale rates and for a period of three months at a time. Estimates were drawn up by the steward, approved by the Superintendent of Education, or by the Board of Education, bids were received, and contracts awarded accordingly. Large numbers of old bills of merchandise are in the Cherokee files at the Oklahoma Historical Society and at the University of Oklahoma showing thousands of dollars worth of purchases from mercantile firms of Tahlequah, Fort Smith, and St. Louis.⁸ The total appropriation for this school ranged from \$2,000 to \$3,000 a year.

The steward of the Colored High School (also sometimes called Superintendent) was appointed and commissioned by the Principal Chief for a period of two years with the advice and consent of the Senate. He had to be a citizen of the Cherokee Nation, though the teachers did not. The steward was required to give bond in the sum of five thousand dollars. His salary was three hundred dollars a year. The school was to run two years with twenty-five pupils, then twenty-five more were to be added. At the end of four years the first twenty-five were to be discharged and the number was to be kept at fifty from then on.⁹ Teachers' salaries varied from thirty to sixty-five dollars per month. All officers and employees except the teachers were responsible to the steward,¹⁰ the teachers were responsible directly to the Board of Education. No hogs could be raised at the school but the steward was "required to sell the slop or swill to the highest bidder and to turn the proceeds over to the treasurer for the benefit of the school fund."¹¹

The school first opened for business January 1, 1890, with Nelson Lowrey of Tahlequah as steward and with an enrollment of

⁷ *Ibid.*, 277.

⁸ Some of the main firms that commonly supplied this school were J. W. Stapler and Sons, Percy Wyly, Richards and McSpadden, Ft. Smith Wholesale Grocery Company, and Shibly Woods Grocery Company.

Following is the bill of goods purchased for the school for the first three months of its existence: Flour, 1800 lbs., \$45; meal, 20 bu., \$10; bacon, 1200 lbs., \$120; beef, 600 lbs., \$30; pork, 600 lbs., \$30; lard, 100 lbs., \$10; coffee, 135 lbs., \$30; tea, 5 lbs., \$3; sugar, 300 lbs., \$24; syrup, 40 gals., \$20; hominy, 300 lbs., \$9; kraut, 1 bbl., \$8; potatoes, 16 bu., \$12; dried fruit, 4 bu., \$6; salt, 1 bbl., \$2.75; pepper, 2 lbs., .70; baking powder, 20 lbs., \$4; soda, 10 lbs., .80; coal oil, 1 bbl., \$8.50; brooms, 1 doz., \$2.40; wood, 20 loads, \$20; labor, \$78; matron, \$22.50. This made a total of \$496.65. This was to supply thirty people: 25 students, 1 steward, 1 cook, 1 laborer, 1 laundress, and 1 matron. T. B. Hitchcock was then President of the Board of Education and Eli H. Whitmire, Secretary.

⁹ *Constitution and Laws of the Cherokee Nation*, 1892, p. 279.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 281.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 282.

approximately twenty-five pupils. Lowrey served in this capacity until November 26, 1895 and then served again during the years 1902 and 1903. People who visited the school at that time say that he kept a neat clean kitchen. O. S. Fox of Ohio was principal teacher from 1890 to 1894. Only one teacher was employed at first, later as many as three or four. Mrs. Fannie Lowrey was teacher during a part of her husband's term, 1894-1896, and then taught there at intervals for a number of years afterwards.¹² Mrs. Clara Vann, grandmother of Mrs. Lelia Ross of Tahlequah, was matron and laundress at the school in these early years. George Vann was appointed steward November 26, 1895 and served until August 25, 1899.¹³

Evidently the high school attendance was not maintained at its legal maximum for, after a few years, it was considered advisable to establish a primary department. Hence, on December 6, 1895, during the administration of Samuel H. Mayes, the following law was passed:¹⁴

Be it enacted by the National Council, That there be and is hereby established a Primary Department for the Colored High School, which shall be limited to one boy and one girl to be selected from each Colored Primary school of the Cherokee Nation by the Board of Education, under the same rules in all respects governing the selection of Primaries for the Male and Female Seminaries.

This change at least had the effect of increasing the attendance and gave some children educational advantages otherwise unobtainable. The National Council passed another act, which became law November 5, 1897, reducing the annual term of school from nine months to eight. But it was changed back to nine by agreement between the Dawes and Cherokee Commissions in 1899.¹⁵

George F. Nave was steward, or superintendent, from August, 1899 to November, 1901.¹⁶ H. H. Bryant of Perry, Kansas, was

¹² Mrs. Fannie Lowrey, originally from Ft. Scott, Kansas, was one of the oldest colored teachers, in point of service, in the Nation, having taught in the high school and in the public schools practically all of her life. She died at Tahlequah in 1928.

¹³ *Cherokee Files*, Phillips Collection, University of Oklahoma.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Pamphlet* giving agreement between Dawes Commission and Cherokee Commission, 1899, p. 11.

¹⁶ George F. Nave lived in Tahlequah at this time. He later moved to Muskogee where he conducted a real estate office. He achieved some distinction in 1917 for his leaflet on *The New Negro's Attitude toward His Government at a Time Like This*, which was an appeal to the Negro to support the war. He seems to have striven for higher educational standards for the Negro race. Following is a copy of his commission.

Tahlequah, I. T. Nov. 20, 1899.
Commission

By authority of the Cherokee Nation.

Whereas, it appears that George F. Nave was duly recommended by the Principal Chief, and confirmed by the Senate Branch of the National Council on the

teacher for one year during this time. He died while teaching here and his brother C. B. Bryant was employed to take his place. The annual report of the Board of Education for the school year 1898-1899 gives us some insight into the progress the school had made to this point:¹⁷

Upon investigation we find that this school [the Colored High School] has never done the work intended that it should do.

Pupils have been admitted who never had attended school before, therefore making this institution in fact, a primary school, instead of a real high school, as was intended. It has done fairly well the past term, though the average attendance was below twentyfive. It has now about forty pupils of all grades, and the prospects are more hopeful. No course of study has ever been prescribed, which may be partly the cause of the admission of pupils of the primary grades. The Board has adopted the following course of study, and pupils will hereafter be admitted by passing a satisfactory examination to the freshman year.

Senior
Astronomy
Algebra
Natural Philosophy
Psychology
Literature
Physical Geography

Junior
Algebra
Arithmetic
Physics
Rhetoric
General History
Higher Arithmetic
Geology
American Literature

Sophomore
Practical Arithmetic
Mental Arithmetic
General History
Grammar
Book Keeping
Botany
Spelling and Composition
Freshman
Practical Arithmetic
Grammar
Physiology
United States History
Spelling and Composition
Penmanship

Mrs. L. T. Brown is the teacher this term, and promises to be a useful woman among the people of her race. The present Superintendent, George F. Nave, is taking much interest in the domestic department and showing commendable pride in keeping the building and surroundings in a healthy condition.

18th day of November 1899, for the office of Steward of the Colored High School, Now Therefore, Be it known to all whom it may concern, that I, T. M. Buffington Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation, by virtue of the authority in me vested by the Constitution, do hereby in the name, and by the authority of the Cherokee Nation, Commission the aforesaid George F. Nave to take the office of Steward of the Colored High School, and to do and perform all the duties, and exercise all the powers and authority that now is, or which may hereafter be prescribed by law for the holder of such office, to have and to hold the same for the period of two years from the third Monday in November 1899, according to law, or until his successor has been duly elected and commissioned, unless discharged by due course of law.

In testimony whereof, I hereunto set my hand and the seal of the Cherokee Nation, at Tahlequah, on this the 20th day of Nov. A. D. 1899.

T. M. Buffington
Principal Chief.

Seal of the
Cherokee Nation.

¹⁷ *Annual Report of the Board of Education, 1899, p. 17-18.*

Included in this Annual Report is the steward's report to the Board. It was as follows:¹⁸

Hon. J. T. Parks, President Board of Education.

Sir: I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of October 4th, making inquiry of the condition of the domestic department of this institution, of which I have to say that the domestic as well as the other departments are in very fair condition.

The school has been unusually large this term, there being enrolled 48 pupils and many were turned away for lack of bedsteads and stoves. There are in regular attendance 41 pupils, 38 boarders and 3 day scholars.

The primary privilege allowed in this institution has been used largely to accommodate the poor and orphans, who were without means of acquiring the rudiments of an education.

As near as can be correctly estimated, it costs about \$7.50 per month to board a pupil in this school.

I would most respectfully recommend the appropriation of \$75.00 for 16 desks for use in the Colored High School.

As to the future good of this institution I have to say, that the interest awakened seems to be deep and lasting, and I feel safe in saying that with proper management this school will become a leading educational institution for Cherokee freedmen.

And I would respectfully recommend that the school work be placed upon a graded course of study, and teachers be required to adhere strictly to said course, that more good might be accomplished and better results attained.

Respectfully submitted.

Geo. F. Nave, Supt.

In a later report to the Board of Education, Nave said in part:¹⁹

The school made a step in an agricultural direction last term, and raised all the onions, beans, peas, cabbages, irish and sweet potatoes that we have used up to the present time. And I think this demonstrates to what extent the school might be made selfsupporting were we able to fence (10) or (15) acres of ground for school purposes.

A great deal of work has been done upon the premises since my last report. Trees and grass have been planted in the yard, and some brush and briars have been cleared away from near the yard fence. Indications are that the school is in a fair way to accomplish more in the future. . . . And on behalf of the Cherokee Freedmen who are the beneficiaries of this institution I desire to thank the administration for the attention given this school during its present regime.

Respectfully submitted.

Geo. F. Nave

Superintendent.

Superintendent Nave submitted another report in which he listed thirteen primary pupils whose fathers were able to pay and fifteen who were orphans or had no means of support. These first thirteen came from Chouteau, Spavinaw, Vinita, Melvin, and Hayden.²⁰

¹⁸ *Annual Report of the Board of Education, 1899*, pp. 18-19.

¹⁹ *Private Papers of George F. Nave*.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

The residences of the others are not given. The pupils were required to work one hour each day at some useful employment about the school.

Superintendent Nave claims to be the author of the clause in an act of the National Council of 1901 "That the Cherokee Board of Education shall not employ, as teacher in the Cherokee National Male or Female Seminary and Colored High School and Orphan Asylum, any person who is not a graduate of some reputable school or college, not inferior in grade and standing to the said Seminaries."²¹

During the early years of this century a number of teachers were employed both from the Indian Territory and from distant states. Through the whole career of the school the enrollment ranged from below twenty-five to as high as seventy-five or eighty. The Nation employed prominent physicians to look after the health of the pupils, such as Ed. W. Blake, Otto Rogers, C. M. Ross, and J. M. Thompson. The school was continued until 1910 under the general direction of D. Frank Redd, Supervisor of Education 1906-1907, and later under the direction of A. S. Wyly. The graduating class of 1908 consisted of Lelia C. Swepston, now Mrs. Lelia Ross of Tahlequah, Katie Glass, Roscoe Foreman, and Clarence Hicks.²²

An undated manuscript in the Cherokee archives in the Phillips Collection of the University of Oklahoma gives an act passed by the National Council authorizing the Principal Chief to enter into an agreement with agents of the Board of Missions of the Presbyterian Church to transfer to them "the High School Building and appurtenances thereto belonging erected and set apart by authority of law for the purpose of imparting higher educational privileges to the children of colored persons duly recognized as lawful citizens of the Cherokee Nation", based upon the following conditions: To grant them the building and equipment for a term not exceeding ten years. Also to appropriate \$1500 annually for the first two years to run the school and \$2,500 annually thereafter during the continuance of the contract. The Presbyterian Church in turn was to provide matron and teachers and to run the school, providing everything for the pupils except clothing. They were to have twenty-five pupils, about equally divided between the sexes, the first two years and fifty from then on, and were to make annual reports to the National Council as to the condition and progress of the school. The Board of Education should have the privilege of inspecting the school at any time. This contract evidently was rejected by the church, as no such disposition of the school was ever made.

²¹ Personal Interview with George F. Nave.

²² Mrs. Ross still has her diploma. It was signed by A. S. Wyly, D. Frank Redd, and the three colored teachers, and bears the seal of the Educational Department of the Cherokee Nation.

By act of Congress April 30, 1908, the Secretary of the Interior was instructed to take charge of all buildings and lands of the Cherokees used for government, school, or other tribal purposes, appraise and sell the property, and deposit the proceeds in the United States Treasury to the credit of the Cherokee Nation. In compliance with this Congressional act this property was sold at auction to the highest bidder, the Collate Missionary Baptist Association (colored), for \$1,350. Chief W. C. Rogers turned it over to them and gave them a deed to it April 3, 1914. This was approved by the Department of the Interior April 6, 1914. The Negroes had a hard time raising this purchase price and eventually the amount was reduced some four hundred dollars. The Reverend T. P. Tuggles had charge of the property for the Association. The building, together with the cleared land around it, was rented for whatever it would bring and was used by first one family and then another as a residence. In July, 1916, the building was burned, possibly a case of incendiarism. The land was sold by this Association to private individuals in 1920. Nothing marks the site today but the beautiful springs and a pile of crumbled ruins overgrown with shrubs and briars.

Like many a small school that has held sway for a time and then passed into the limbo of forgotten things with no means of measuring its total effect upon the life of the time, this institution has been obliterated by the march of modern progress. The memory of it reminds one of the many excellent enterprises of the Cherokee Nation, not a failure but a stepping stone to better conditions. It lasted for two decades and was evidently of considerable value to the colored people of the Cherokee Nation.

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5. *Constitution and Laws of the Cherokee Nation, Published by an Act of the National Council, 1892. The Foley R'y Printing Company, Parsons, Kansas, 1893.*
6. *Dawes Commission-Cherokee Commission Agreement, Signed at Muskogee, I. T., January 14, 1899.*
7. *Messages of the Chiefs of the Cherokee Nation.*
8. *Cherokee Advocate, Tahlequah, I. T.*
9. *Private Papers of the Late George F. Nave, Muskogee, Oklahoma.*
10. *Personal Interviews with a number of individuals who lived through this period.*