

THE CHOCTAW NATION IN 1843:
A MISSIONARY'S VIEW

By Keith L. Bryant, Jr.*

On February 9, 1843, the Reverend Jared Olmsted wrote a letter to his brother Orrin L. Olmsted which reveals both despair at the primitive conditions in the Choctaw Nation and hope for the future.¹ One of a hearty band of missionary-teachers sent by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Olmsted and his wife Julia labored for seven years among the Choctaws in the west. Born in Norwalk, Connecticut on August 19, 1811, he had been educated at the Courtland Academy in New York. When he arrived in the Choctaw Nation, Olmsted built a home and a school for Choctaw boys in the region of Fort Towson. The school was named Norwalk after his birth-place.² Olmsted died on September 19, 1843, but his school was continued under the direction of Charles Copeland.³

This letter presents a picture of the difficulties faced by the Choctaws and their teachers, but it also demonstrates the earnest desire on the part of both for the expansion of educational facilities. Olmsted's opinions concerning the Choctaws reflect the frontier nature of the area which the Indians had settled only ten years earlier. The efforts to develop a school system were later rewarded when these institutions provided many young Choctaws with an opportunity to become educated.

* Keith L. Bryant, Jr., Assistant Professor of History in the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, is a native of Oklahoma. He has contributed the letter of Jared Olmsted, with annotations, from the small collection of "Olmsted Family Papers" in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.—Ed.

¹ Letter from Jared Olmsted to Orrin L. Olmsted, February 9, 1843, in the Olmsted Family Papers (State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin). This is the only letter from Jared Olmsted in the collection. Apparently other members of the family spelled the name Olmsted.

² Norwalk was a school for small boys, located 5 miles north and west of Wheelock Seminary. The school was closed in 1854. It was noted for its boy singers trained by "Mr. Pitkin," a teacher, who was well known long after the Civil War, living in Northeast Texas.—Ed.

³ Information from the Olmsted Family Genealogy supplied by Mrs. Henry Kreis in the Olmsted Family Papers.

THE JARED OLINATED LETTER

Norwalk, Fort Towson P. O.
Feb. 9th 1843

Orrin L. Olinated Esq.
Elmira, New York.
Dear Brother,

I have not quit writing you, for any thing but my own negligence. And even now I shall make no promises of amendment. At any rate, I believe I keep as much Blank Paper, which ought to be scribbled over, as most ministers. So you see my faults, big & little.

Affairs of this Na. [Nation] are as usual, excepting on the subject of Public Schools. At the last General Council of the Nation, a very important act was passed—appropriating \$18,000 for Public Schools, to be located in the Na.⁴ Three of them are to be academies for Boys. Six are to be female Seminaries for girls. All of these schools are to be Boarding schools. These schools & the money has been given to the Methodist & Presbyterian Societies provided they will put in 1/5 as many \$. The places [sic] for these schools have been selected. One is (to) be at Rev. Alfred Wright's station.⁵ One at Rev. C. Kingsbury's.⁶ One at Rev. C. Byington's.⁷ Two others are to be 30 miles west of me, but not very near any of our Miss. [Mission] Stations. These five are to be under the care of Presbyterian missionaries. Although this act has passed in the Choctaw Council, yet it will not become a Law till it receives the sanction of Congress, together with the signature of the Secretary of War. In 1836 the Chick [Chickasaw] Indians treated with the Choctaws & became incorporated into their Nation, for this privilege the Chickasaws pay the Choctaws the Annual Interest of 600,000 \$.⁸ 18,000 \$ of this Annuity has been appropriated as above mentioned. Each Superintendent Teacher is not to receive more than 400 \$ annually with his Bed & Board. There is so much care & responsibility connected with these schools, that it is very doubtful whether I engage in either of them. This is the

⁴ A law passed in November, 1842, *Laws of the Choctaw Nation* (New York, 1869), 76. Cited by Grant Foreman, *The Five Civilized Tribes* (Norman, 1934), 58.

⁵ Wheelock school had been directed by the Presbyterian missionary Alfred Wright before the new legislation, but was enlarged and reopened on May 1, 1843.

⁶ Cyrus Kingsbury, another Presbyterian missionary sent by the ABCFM, conducted a female seminary at Pine Ridge near Doakville.

⁷ Cyrus Byington of the ABCFM was in charge of Iyanubbee Female Seminary near Eagle Town.

⁸ The Chickasaws agreed in 1837 to pay the Choctaws \$530,000 for the right to settle in the Choctaw Nation. See Angie Debo, *The Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic* (Norman, 1934), p. 71.

step of the Choctaws towards Public Schools to be under their own operation & control. I hope they will be blessed & guided in the right way.

The missions among the Choctaws has been greatly bless[ed] for the last three years. (See Miss. [Missionary] Herald for Jan. 1843).⁹ The Choctaws are said to be stupid, filthy, & but a little Natural intelligent. This simply is too true. But they may rise in the search for intelligence & Religion.

We are pleasantly situated & have many of the comforts of life. I have spent much of my time these years just in building my own dwelling & school house. I hope to finish all my build-ings this coming spring if we are spared & have comfortable health. My school has been the best in the Na. this year past. We have had a great overflow of Red & Arkansas Rivers, a few weeks past. Red River rose six feet or more above high water mark. Took cattle, horses, hogs, houses, fences & in many instances, people. It is not yet known how many lives are lost, nor the amount of property. We live eight miles from the River, & suffered no loss whatever—unless it be in the lack of Pork & Beef hereafter.

Please tell me your minister's Name. I saw a young Minister from E. [Elmira] at Synod in Homer Village in 1840.¹⁰ . . . Did sister R. think when we all lived in the old Log house that one of the number was obliged to live & die in one among the Indians of the West?

We have no important news from any of our relatives. There are about 1400 Troops, Rank & File lying about us & on our borders. So much for sword & musket, with a spark or two of the Spirit's influences. . . . We may never see you. If so, all is the same to me if we meet in heaven . . .

Very Respectfully

Jared Olmsted

A kiss for the little one.

Julia S. Olmsted

⁹ Olmsted refers to the *Missionary Herald* which was published in Boston, Massachusetts by the ABCFM.

¹⁰ This refers to a town in New York State.