

## SPENCER ACADEMY, CHOCTAW NATION, 1842-1900

By W. David Baird\*

The removal of the Choctaw Indians in the 1830's to a new home west of the Mississippi River delayed but did not deter arrangements for formal education. Once in Indian Territory the tribe continued to send promising students to the Choctaw Academy in Scott County, Kentucky, but when confidence in the eastern school waned, the Choctaws envisioned an academic institution in their own country west, that would supply the training necessary to advance the youth of their nation.

By an Act of the Choctaw Council in 1842, the Nation authorized a boarding school for boys at a site ten miles north of Doaksville. Grants of \$2,000 from the United States Indian Civilization Fund, \$6000 from annuities received by the tribe, and \$833 from the federal government as salary for the principal teacher provided the annual endowment of the institution. The academy was named for Secretary of War, John C. Spencer, and governed by a Board of Trustees selected by the Choctaw general council. The Choctaws sought a pious, Presbyterian minister to superintend the new school and directed Indian Agent William Armstrong to contact the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions about a qualified man.<sup>1</sup>

The Board of Foreign Missions, an agency of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, had headquarters in New York City. Organized in 1837 to place the denomination directly in mission activity, it did not compete with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (A.B.C.F.M.) which received support from numerous church organizations, Presbyterian included. Thus, in contacting the Foreign Mission Board the Choctaws were seeking assistance from a strictly Presbyterian organization.

Since the academy was scheduled to open in November,

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<sup>1</sup> *Annual Report, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1843*, pp. 368-9; *American Indian Correspondence, 1843, 1844*, Box 9, Vol. 2, Presbyterian Historical Society (hereafter cited *American Indian, mss.*, PHH); Joseph P. Folsom, Comp., *Constitution and Laws of the Choctaw Nation* (New York, 1899), p. 70; Carolyn Thomas Foreman, "The Choctaw Academy," *The Chronicle of Oklahoma*, Vol. VI (1928), p. 463.

1843, Armstrong urged the mission board to recommend a superintendent to act under direction of the school's trustees. The mission board suggested Edmund McKinney, a native of Hollidaysburg, Pennsylvania, who was already at their Seminole mission. McKinney received notice of his selection to the superintendency in November, 1843 and departed immediately with his wife and two sons for the Choctaw Nation, arriving at Spencer on December 8.<sup>2</sup>

Turmoil met McKinney. Items purchased by Agent Armstrong and essential to the school were on a Red River landing, while the trustees insisted on beginning the first term on January 1, 1844. The new superintendent postponed the enrollment for thirty days, using the interval to transport the supplies and construct additional facilities for Spencer's first class of sixty boys. The academy opened to a hopeful future, but after two years of conflict with the Choctaw trustees, McKinney recognized the need for different administrative arrangements and resigned his post. Yet he left with some measure of success for, to his credit, it was the commencement of the institution's first term and the construction of a third dormitory.<sup>3</sup>

Many leading Choctaws from the first questioned the value of direct tribal control of Spencer. The McKinney administration bore out their fears. Nonetheless the two-year experience was "of much profit to the nation, as the people are now satisfied they cannot do it," Baptist leader P. P. Brown observed in 1847.<sup>4</sup>

To supervise their national academy, the Choctaws turned to church groups. In 1845 the Methodists and the A.B.C.F.M. rejected a proposal to manage the school, but the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions which recommended McKinney accepted the invitation for fear that "Presbyterianism [might] be rooted out of the Nation and ignorant fanaticism reign." For the position of superintendent the Board chose thirty-one year old Reverend James B. Ramsey, a native of New York and Princeton graduate. On June 1, 1846, Ramsey accepted control of Spencer Academy in behalf of the Presbyterian Church.<sup>5</sup>

One of Ramsey's early reports provided a description of

<sup>2</sup> American Indian mss., 1843-44, Box 9, Vol. 2, PIIR.

<sup>3</sup> *Annual Report*, 1844, p. 10; American Indian mss., 1845, Box 9, Vol. 2, PIIR; McKinney to Peter L. Fitchlynn, Spencer, Sept. 25, 1844, Fitchlynn Papers, Gilcrease Institute; *Annual Report of the Board of Foreign Missions*, 1846, p. 5 (hereafter cited as *Board of Foreign Missions*, date).

<sup>4</sup> *The Indian Advocate*, September, 1847, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> William H. Good, *Outposts of Zion* (Cincinnati, 1863), p. 165.

Spencer and its environment. The superintendent's home was directly in the center of the academy's grounds which extended over two and one-quarter square miles. Most of the school's buildings were constructed of roughly-hewn logs. The three dormitories—named for trustees Peter P. Pitchlynn, Robert M. Jones, and William M. Armstrong—formed a quadrangle, measured sixteen by sixty-four feet, had two stories with upper and lower porches, and were constructed of crudely sawed boards. On both floors of the dormitories were four, sixteen-foot-square rooms, each with three windows and an outside door. The walls were coarsely plastered and whitewashed, and the buildings were roofed by homemade shingles. Situated on a gentle knoll and encircled by tranquil highlands, the academy held considerable charm for its eastern administrator.<sup>4</sup>

By directing the academy the Presbyterians hoped to evangelize the students. Yet a church was not organized at Spencer until January, 1848, a milestone that did not satisfy Ramsey. "We have not enjoyed those visible evidences of God," he declared, by which he meant conversion of the students. Ramsey harshly attributed the mission effort failure to the unfaithfulness, worldliness, lack of consecration, and selfishness of the missionaries. He placed special blame on the school's cooks, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph McClure, who once suggested that the missionaries made "a god of their belly." The McClures refused to leave upon Ramsey's request, but in September, 1847 were summarily dismissed by the Mission House in New York.<sup>5</sup>

The adversities and trials of the institution pressed heavily upon Ramsey. In March, 1849, with his health deteriorating and staff disunity at a peak, he submitted his resignation. In June he received the welcome news that his replacement was enroute, but before he could depart both his wife and infant son died. As the truly pious do he blamed his afflictions upon his own actions, and considering himself a hypocrite, he refused to pray.<sup>6</sup>

Alexander Reid was selected as Spencer's new superintendent, arriving at the school on July 11, 1849. Reid was born in Kirkmichael, Scotland, in 1818, and immigrated to the United States in 1831. A tailor by trade, he graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1849 and entered the service of the missionary board. Reid was a very able superintendent, and

<sup>4</sup> American Indian mus., 1846, Box 9, Vol. 2, P118.

<sup>5</sup> Board of Foreign Missions, 1847, p. 7; American Indian mus., 1847, 1848, Box 9, Vol. 2, P118; J. B. Garratt, *Historical Sketches of the Missions Under the Care of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church*, 3rd. ed., rev. (Philadelphia, 1890), p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> American Indian mus., 1849, Box 9, Vol. 2, P118.

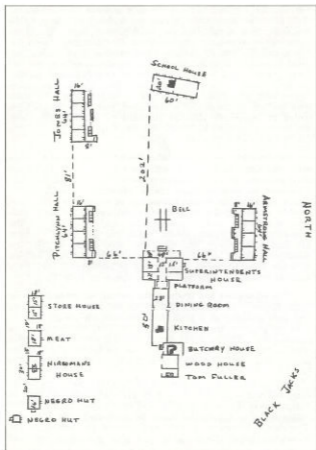


DIAGRAM OF BUILDINGS AT SPENCER ACADEMY,  
CHOCTAW NATION, 1840

Traced from Ramsey's report to W. Lewis, Spencer, 13 Aug. 1840,  
American Indian Correspondence MSS., Box U, Vol. 2,  
Presbyterian Historical Society.

under his guidance the academy came to fulfill tribal expectations.<sup>9</sup>

Much to Reid's dislike a well-managed school required the use of Negro slaves, as the Choctaws did few menial tasks. Lensed from Indian owners and more than just field hands, the Spencer bondsmen were an intricate part of academy life. Wallace and Minerva Willis sang for the students and missionaries, songs that reflected the trials and desires of oppressed souls. Reid later taught these songs to the Fisk University Jubilee Singers at Newark, New Jersey in 1871. Sung before Queen Victoria, among those pieces composed by the Spencer slaves in the academy's fields were "Steal Away to Jesus," "The Angels Are Coming," "I'm a Rolling, I'm a Rolling," and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." Yet this contribution to American folk music did not soothe the superintendent's anti-slavery conscience.<sup>10</sup>

To Reid ordained ministers had not the grace and women not the stamina to serve as missionaries at Spencer. "The bare thought of a man and his wife coming puts me in a fever," he wrote. The superintendent's own experiences particularly prejudiced him against women. His first wife died shortly after the birth of their first child in January, 1854, and Reid concluded that Spencer labors crucified her. He was certain that other women would pay the same price, and he determined to obstruct their coming to the academy. But one year later his attitude mellowed, and he married and brought to Spencer Miss F. K. Thompson, a missionary teacher at Wapanucks Institute, Chickasaw Nation. Additional female teachers soon followed, yet ordained ministers he always considered unsuitable.<sup>11</sup>

Reid had duties other than managing the school. He traveled and lived among the Choctaws for better acquaintance and evangelical purposes. In the one summer of 1851 he spoke fifty times, rode nearly 1,500 miles, and saw over 3,000 people. He reorganized the Spencer church in April, 1854, and that summer he also saw a religious revival among the Choctaws living near the academy. As many as 700 Indians were present at different sacramental meetings between 1854 and 1855. Reid was also the unofficial dean of the Foreign Board's Choctaw mission and frequently advised other mission administrators.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Necrological Reports and Annual Proceedings of Princeton Theological Seminary*, Vol. 2 (Princeton, 1880), p. 88; American Indian mu., 1840, Vol. 2, Box 9, PHS.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 1852, Box 12, Vol. 1, PHS; J. B. Thoburn and Muriel H. Wright, *Oklahoma: A History of the State and Its People*, Vol. 2 (New York, 1929), p. 826; Muriel H. Wright, "Early River Navigation in Oklahoma," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. VIII (March, 1930), p. 82.

<sup>11</sup> American Indian mu., 1851, 1854, 1855, Box 12, Vol. 1, PHS.



**ALEXANDER REID, SAGE OF SPENCER**  
From Robert E. Flickinger, *The Cactus Freedmen*.



**GROUNDS OF OLD SPENCER, 1905.**  
Photograph by the author.

After seven years, the cares of Spencer prompted Reid to resign his post in favor of Gaylord More, a New York minister. More arrived at the academy the first of November, 1856, but after only one month advised the mission board he would leave at the session's end. Conditions were more rustic than he expected. When the New York agency in desperation implored Reid to return to the academy, he accepted the assignment and quickly restored the confidence of the Choctaws in their national academy. But at the end of the term, Reid returned to his wife in New Jersey.<sup>13</sup>

What was restored was lost in the next term. James Frothingham, who served as acting-superintendent for the 1858-59 session, proved incapable of coordinating the diverse interests at Spencer. For the second time without his wife and now seemingly indispensable, Reid came back in August, 1859. His arrival inspired the good will of the Indians, and after several months Reid could report the school in "as good or better shape than ever." But he was unable to say the same for the Choctaw people.<sup>14</sup>

The issues dividing the United States in the 1860's were also at work in the Indian Territory. Slave-holding Choctaws reacted negatively to abolitionist sentiment, the tribal Council in early 1854 having required all abolitionists to leave the nation. Thereafter local missionaries either honestly or prudently remained silent on the inflammatory question. For such discreetness the ardently anti-slave A.B.C.F.M. dismissed its Choctaw representatives, an action that reinforced the tribal suspicions that missionaries were abolitionists. When H. A. Wentz, a former Spencer teacher, was seized selling firearms on May 20, 1861, few doubted the subversiveness of mission activity. On the following day the school was visited by an armed mob in search of additional weapons, and fearing a return visit, administrators closed the academy. Most of the missionary-teachers left the academy in May, and by September only Reid and his family remained. Despite his opposition to slavery, Reid said: "I intend to remain here as long as I am allowed to do so undisturbed."<sup>15</sup>

The divisive forces of slavery and sectionalism in the United States affected not only the federal government but religious organizations as well. Southern churches withdrew from the Presbyterian General Assembly, and after the formation of the

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 1858, 1859, Box 10, Vol. 2, PHS.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 1858, 1860, Box 10, Vol. 1, PHS.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 1854, 1855, Box 10, Vol. 2, part 1859, 1861, Box 10, Vol. 1, PHS; *Board of Foreign Missions*, 1862, p. 14.

Confederacy, established the Presbyterian Church, Confederate States of America. This southern organization desired to duplicate the many services of the General Assembly, especially the foreign mission activity. Accordingly, it formed a mission agency and appointed as secretary, J. L. Wilson, who resigned a similar post with the northern churches. When the Choctaws cast their lot with the South, Wilson hastened to the Indian Territory and encouraged the remaining Choctaw missionaries to accept the oversight of his board. The invitation was accepted, and Wilson specifically recommended that Alexander Reid receive the confidence of southern Christians.<sup>16</sup>

Spencer Academy did not function as an educational institution during the strife that followed southern secession. The dormitories in 1863 were used as a Confederate hospital for eighteen months, accepting casualties from minor military skirmishes. Confederate General Douglas H. Cooper arrived at Spencer on December 14, 1863 with the Wells Battalion and established a headquarters without disturbing the hospital. After the winter's incampment, Cooper withdrew to Fort Washita, leaving the academy to succor a flood of refugees displaced by the fortunes of war. To hundreds who suffered extreme privations Spencer offered shelter and sympathy.<sup>17</sup>

Alexander Reid held undisputed possession of the superintendent's house, dining room, and kitchen during the military occupation. General Cooper gave strict orders not to disturb him, but life for the Reid family was nonetheless sadly complicated. In October, 1861, after his fellow missionaries had departed, Reid's third child was born. The childbirth retarded Mrs. Reid's recovery from feeble health, and she died tragically on July 10, 1864. And for the second time the devoted missionary deposited the remains of yet another loved one on the small hill west of the academy.<sup>18</sup>

After the war Reid worked to reestablish Spencer and re-

<sup>16</sup> Nevins, *Encyclopedia of the Presbyterian Church in U.S.A.*, p. 1017; American Indian mss., 1861, Box 12, Vol. 3, PHIS; *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, 1880-1901), Series I, Vol. XXII, Part II, p. 1050; Reid to Alnall, Spencer, March 27, 1860, Sue McBeth Mss., Indian Archives, Oklahoma Historical Society.

<sup>17</sup> Mrs. S. O. Lee to Mrs. Woodruff, Omaha Mission, 20 May 1867, Box C-35, Colonial Danes Collection MSS, University of Oklahoma Library; *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, 1880-1901), Series I, XXII, Part II, 1080; Reid to Alnall, Spencer, 27 March 1860, Sue McBeth Papers MSS, Oklahoma Historical Society.

<sup>18</sup> Mrs. Lee to Mrs. Woodruff, Omaha Mission, 20 May 1867, Box C-35, Colonial Danes Collection mss., University of Oklahoma Library; Reid to Alnall, Spencer, 27 March 1860, Sue McBeth Papers mss., Oklahoma Historical Society.



ligious interest among the Choctaws. In February, 1869, he left the nation to enroll his children in an eastern school, but only after the tribal council the previous autumn had authorized the rebuilding of the academy. Calvin Ervin was employed to make the repairs and worked steadily for two years before Spencer reflected its antebellum splendor. On November 2, 1870, the tribe withdrew \$6,000 from the neighborhood school fund in anticipation of opening the academy and contacted the Baptist, Methodist, and both northern and southern Presbyterian church mission boards about supervising the school and supplying teachers.<sup>19</sup>

The mission agencies of both northern and southern Presbyterian Churches agreed to oversee the academy. Some Choctaws preferred Spencer's oldest benefactor, but the council favored the mission board of the southern church that had agreed to resuscitate Spencer only to prevent it from falling into "hands that would make it a curse to the Nation." As superintendent the southern Presbyterians selected the Reverend J. H. Colton, a native of Fayetteville, North Carolina. Colton accepted administration of Spencer Academy on May 24, 1871, under terms of a contract that stipulated an enrollment of sixty boys. But unable to recruit sufficient teachers, he entered only thirty-two students.<sup>20</sup>

The lack of teachers detracted from the success of Colton's first year, yet when J. L. Wilson visited Spencer again in 1874, he reassured his denomination that the school had never been "in a more flourishing condition." Wilson's observation, however, was subterfuge as there was no comparison to earlier years. Only fifty students were enrolled in 1874 while in the antebellum period Reid had accepted three times that number.<sup>21</sup>

After a brief trip to North Carolina in early 1875, Colton experienced one crisis after another. Choctaw leaders accused him of arbitrarily expelling students and of refusing to consult the Board of Trustees about school policy. He was believed to

<sup>19</sup> Reid to Sue Melbeth, Princeton, 10 Feb. 1872, Sue Melbeth Papers ms., Oklahoma Historical Society; Mrs. Lee to Mrs. Woodruff, Spencer, 8 Dec. 1860, Box C-34, Colonial Dames Collection ms., University of Oklahoma Library. See also E. K. Christon, "Memories of my Childhood Days in the Choctaw Nation," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, IX (June 1931), 151; *Annual Report, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1869*, 410, and 1870, 293; *Acts of the Choctaw Nation*, 2 Nov. 1870 (a manuscript collection, University of Oklahoma Library).

<sup>20</sup> Reid to Lee, Princeton, n.d., Lee Family Papers ms., Presbyterian Historical Society; *Acts of the Choctaw Nation*, 28 Oct. 1871; *Annual Report, Executive Committee of Foreign Missions, 1871*, 4, and 1872, 6; *The Missionary*, April, 1871, 51.

<sup>21</sup> *The Missionary*, May, 1874, 68.

have established a store at the academy and to have delayed the opening of the term beginning in the fall, 1875. Accordingly, the last of October, 1876, the Spencer Board of Trustees formally requested the southern Presbyterians to dismiss Colton.<sup>21</sup>

John J. Read replaced Colton. Read was born in Hinds County, Mississippi in January, 1843. He served four years in the Confederate Army and entered the ministry at the conflict's end. He came to Spencer in December, 1876 with his wife and infant daughter from a parish in Houston, Texas.<sup>22</sup>

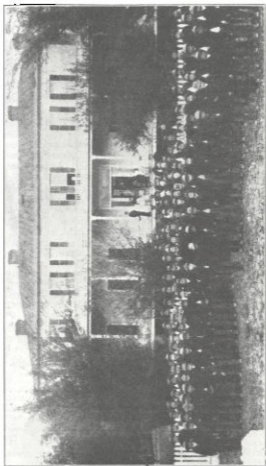
For five years Read worked to raise the level of education at Spencer Academy. His most puzzling problem was the lack of English comprehension among the students, a difficulty not new to Spencer, only to the superintendent. Read made admirable progress, but his work was terminated because of the southern church's decision not to renew its original ten-year administrative contract, ostensibly because of deteriorating facilities. But published motives for withdrawal did not reflect the true circumstances, for the Choctaws actually left the southern church little choice. In November, 1880, the tribal council had indicated its dissatisfaction with the practice of having students do specific chores at Spencer by noting that the boys were "to go to school and not to work." As the discontent was then mutual, Read left Spencer in the summer of 1881. Unfortunately the school's buildings were no longer usable as the home of a thriving educational institution, and the facilities north of Doakville ceased to function as Spencer Academy.<sup>23</sup>

But the school did not die. In late 1877 the Choctaw council had authorized the removal of the institution to Nelson, twenty miles west of the old location and near present Soper, Oklahoma. Principal features of the site were proximity to the railroad, central location, and accessibility during high water. The Choctaw Council provided for erection of new buildings. A wooden, two-story dormitory was built, measuring ninety-three feet in front and two wings which extended 105 feet. Facing south, the structure contained twenty-eight rooms, and instead of several buildings, permitted sleeping rooms, classrooms, kitchen, and dining room to be in one large edifice. At a later

<sup>21</sup> Acts of the Choctaw Nation, 21 October 1876; *The (Atoka) Vindicator*, 6 Dec. 1876.

<sup>22</sup> William D. Morrison, *The Red Man's Tent* (Richmond, c. 1932), pp. 78-9; Natalie Donelson, "Missions and Missionaries of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, XXIV (Winter 1956), p. 433.

<sup>23</sup> *The Missionary*, May, 1877, 110; *Annual Report, Executive Committee of Foreign Missions, 1881*, 12; Acts of the Choctaw Nation, 5 Nov. 1880.



NEW SPENCER ACADEMY

From *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. 1 (September 1928).

date an additional dormitory was constructed to the west.<sup>25</sup> The academy was identified at the second location as New Spencer.

The new site was selected before the southern Presbyterians relinquished control of old Spencer. Thus when Allen Wright, Superintendent of Schools and former Principal Chief of the Choctaw Nation, requested the northern Presbyterian Church to resume administration of Spencer, it was understood that there would be new facilities. This knowledge and the availability of Oliver P. Stark, a former Spencer teacher, to serve as superintendent persuaded the northern church to resume control of the academy in the summer, 1881.<sup>26</sup>

The first term in the facilities at New Spencer began in November, 1882. Stark, in the twilight of a distinguished career, was something less than an adequate administrator and proved incapable of progressive leadership. After his death in 1884, Harvey R. Schermerhorn became the superintendent. The following year, however, the Choctaw council without prior notification revoked the contract with the northern church because Schermerhorn had supposedly "exercised unwarranted authority" in expelling students as well as put "in a farm for his own use." But leading Choctaws soon doubted the wisdom of the Council's action and in a complete reversal, in March, 1886, Schermerhorn was asked to remain at the academy and direct the school under the supervision of the Choctaw government and without church connection.<sup>27</sup>

Schermerhorn reluctantly accepted the appointment. He worked to return Spencer to its previous benefactor, and after securing appropriate Choctaw authority for the transaction in November, 1886, Schermerhorn urged the northern mission board to return to Spencer and "hold this land for the Lord and the Presbyterian Church." The mission board subsequently agreed to a one-year contract, and the superintendent again in behalf of the northern church accepted control of the school in April, 1887.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Report of Allen Wright, Superintendent of Public Schools, 28 Dec. 1880, Box W-26, Allen Wright Collection, University of Oklahoma Library; Acts of the Choctaw Nation, 5 Nov. 1881.

<sup>26</sup> Reid to Lee, Atoka, 10 May 1887, Lee Family Papers ms., PHS.

<sup>27</sup> Acts of the Choctaw Nation, 24 Oct. 1882; *Board of Foreign Missions, 1881*, S. Hurvey Schermerhorn to J. Lowrie, Nelson, 22 June 1882, American Indian, ms., PHS, Number 105, Roll 15, University of Tulsa Library. See also Acts of the Choctaw Nation, 9 Nov. 1885; Turnbull to Schermerhorn, Goodland, 26 July 1886, Box 11, Vol. 4, American Indian, ms., PHS.

<sup>28</sup> Acts of the Choctaw Nation, 5 Nov. 1886; Schermerhorn to J. Lowrie, Nelson, 13 Jan. 1887 and 4 April 1887, American Indian, ms., PHS, Society, Numbers 20 and 02, Roll 15, University of Tulsa Library.

Harvey Schermerhorn left New Spencer when responsibility for the administration of the school was transferred to the Board of Home Missions of the northern Presbyterian Church in July, 1888. The Home Board directed mission activity in the territory of the United States, and by an 1885 agreement with its sister agency, the Foreign Mission Board, was invested with the mission work among the Choctaws. Reverend R. W. Hill, Superintendent of the Presbyterian Home Missions in Indian Territory, accepted temporary oversight of Spencer. In November, Alfred Docking from Kansas was named the permanent superintendent, and Hill returned to his headquarters in Muskogee. For personal reasons, Docking resigned his position after three years in 1891. The new superintendent, W. A. Caldwell was also a capable educator and administrator and for the first time since the Civil War provided for the stipulated one hundred students.<sup>19</sup>

Upon tribal request the Board of Home Missions on July 1, 1894 returned Spencer Academy to the Choctaw Nation, and Caldwell left Indian Territory. The Choctaw Board of Education then assumed direct responsibility for Spencer selecting J. B. Jeter, a Choctaw citizen and former Superintendent of Schools, as superintendent. But tribal direction of the academy presented unexpected difficulties. The annual cost increased \$2,000 over a church-connected administration, and of course, home rule was no insurance against disaster.<sup>20</sup>

On October 3, 1896, Spencer's main building and storeroom burned. Three students whom Jeter had disciplined saturated the front and back stairs of the main building with coal oil late one evening. Once ignited the wooden structure burned rapidly, but most students jumped to safety. Yet the toll was nearly

<sup>19</sup> William R. Moore, ed., *The Presbyterian Digest, 1886* (Philadelphia, c. 1840), pp. 557-8; *Annual Report, Board of Indian Commissioners, 1888*, 31; Sherman H. Doyle, *Presbyterian Home Missions* (New York, 1905), 84; *Annual Report, Board of Home Missions, 1887*, 17. Also see Schermerhorn to J. Lewis Nelson, 30 Aug. 1887, *American Indian, mag.*, 1:118, Number 101. Hill 15, University of Tulsa Library; November vouchers of Spencer Academy, November, 1888, and W. A. Caldwell to Honorable Board of Education of the Choctaw Nation, Nelson, 1 Oct. 1892, Choctaw Schools—Spencer Academy File, Oklahoma Historical Society.

<sup>20</sup> Caldwell to Board of Education, Muskogee, 8 Oct. 1894, Choctaw Schools—Spencer Academy File, Oklahoma Historical Society; *Annual Report, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1894*, 140; Acts of Choctaw Nation, 14 Oct. 1894 and 20 Oct. 1894; Jeter to Board of Education, Nelson, 31 Aug. 1895 and Trullishama, 13 Oct. 1896, Choctaw Schools—Spencer Academy File, Oklahoma Historical Society.

incalculable: five dead, seven seriously burned, and the chief educational resource of the Choctaws was destroyed.<sup>11</sup>

At the Council session in 1897, Jeter urged the rebuilding of the academy. "If the property [were] sold, it would be a waste of money and a crime against the people," he maintained. Accordingly, the Choctaws acted to restore the academy upon its burnt foundations, but funds were not available until November, 1897 and the school failed to open until the fall, 1899.<sup>12</sup>

The first term in the new academy building was the last. The Atoka Agreement of 1897 which provided for the division of Choctaw lands and the dissolution of Choctaw government enabled the United States to also appropriate its school system, and particularly Spencer. The federal government appointed Wallace B. Butz to superintend the academy, but federal control lasted only one year. Spencer burned again on June 23, 1900. Sparks from a fire in the steam pump entered a window in the main building's second story, ignited bedding, and continued to fuel a blaze that spread rapidly through the unplastered, frame structure. No one was injured, but the \$7,000 building was a total loss.<sup>13</sup>

No real effort was made to restore Spencer. After a feeble attempt to wrest control from the United States, the Council authorized the sale of the remaining facilities and grounds. The school was advertised for sale on December 20, 1900, but Superintendent Butz refused possession to Choctaw officials. The land remained in possession of the United States Indian Office until it was allotted at the end of the Choctaw National government.<sup>14</sup>

During its existence the goal of Spencer Academy was to

<sup>11</sup> Jeter to Board of Education, Tushkahoma, 30 Sept. 1897; Jeter to General Council, Tushkahoma, 13 Oct. 1899, Choctaw Schools—Spencer Academy File, Oklahoma Historical Society; *The (Atoka) Indian Citizens*, 8 Oct. 1899; Interview with Mex. Boss Oakes Huff, "Indian Pioneer Papers," Vol. V, Foreman Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society; Mrs. Howard Morris, Soyer, Oklahoma, personal interview with the author at Soyer, 17 April 1965.

<sup>12</sup> Jeter to Board of Education, Tushkahoma, 30 Sept. 1897, Choctaw Schools—Spencer Academy File, Oklahoma Historical Society; Acts of the Choctaw Nation, 29 Oct. 1897 and 11 Nov. 1897.

<sup>13</sup> Angie Debo, "Education in the Choctaw Country after the Civil War," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, X (Sept. 1932), p. 396; *Annual Report, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1899*, 67-9; 1900, 156; 1901, 224. Also, *Annual Report, United States Indian Inspector for the Indian Territory, 1900*, pp. 81, 96; Thomas Hynn to United States Indian Inspector, Washington, 10 Dec. 1900, Vol. 19, Foreman Transcripts, Oklahoma Historical Society.

<sup>14</sup> Two separate Acts of the Choctaw Nation, 31 Oct. 1900. Also, H. S. Mangum to Honorable G. W. Dikes, Goodland, 18 Nov. 1900, Gilbert Dukus Papers, misc., Oklahoma Historical Society.



**CEMETERY, OLD SPENCER, 1905**

*Photograph by author.*



**NEW SPENCER, 1905**

*Photograph by author.*

mold its students into useful citizens through an intellectual and spiritual education. Instruction at Spencer was a day-to-day affair with an established moral and academic routine. Early in the school's history the students rose at daybreak, dressed, and prepared for the required morning prayers, after which they worked at odd jobs until breakfast at seven o'clock. Following breakfast, the grounds were policed, rooms cleaned, and beds made. Classes began at nine and lasted until lunch. Studies resumed at half past one and, with an interval devoted to recreation, continued until half past four when the boys turned again to manual labor. The final meal was taken at sundown when prayers were offered again. By nine the young men were in bed.<sup>15</sup>

Spencer was a mission point to its religious benefactors and all superintendents placed emphasis upon spiritual instruction. In addition to morning and evening prayers, Edmund McKinney required the students to attend a Sunday afternoon Bible class. Alexander Reid permitted those "anxious over their souls" to meet with him at half past four each morning and each Wednesday night. Every day at eleven o'clock he spoke to the boys from a different Bible chapter, and the students also memorized Bible verses and answered questions in the shorter Presbyterian catechism. But efforts to convert the students to an organized church were largely unsuccessful. James Ramsey and Reid recorded more conversions than other superintendents, though rarely did more than ten per cent of the students ever embrace formal Christianity. Yet those who did accept the Presbyterian doctrine were of unusual dedication. For example, Daniel Pinson, Allen Wright, Thomas R. Benton and Alfred Wright all became effective Presbyterian preachers.<sup>16</sup>

As a boarding institution Spencer and the missionaries were both home and parents to the students. Children entering the academy were assigned rooms in one of the four dormitories where there were seldom less than five in one room and frequently as many as seven. During James Ramsey's administration six boys were in each room and three in each bed. The Mission House in New York provided either ready-made articles supplied on the basis of representative measurements or yard

<sup>15</sup> McKinney to W. Lawrie, Spencer, 20 June 1844, Box 9, Vol. 2, *American Indian, misc.*, PHS.

<sup>16</sup> McKinney to W. Lawrie, Spencer, 20 June 1844, and Ramsey to W. Lawrie, Spencer, 28 June 1848, Box 9, Vol. 2; Reid to W. Lawrie, Spencer, 15 March 1851, 24 May 1855, and Reid to J. L. Wilson, 24 May 1855, *American Indian, misc.*, Box 12, Vol. 1, PHS; *Home and Foreign Record*, September, 1852, 130-7. See also R. D. Lee to Mrs. Woodruff, Spencer, 5 Feb. 1861, Box C-34, Colonial Dunes Collection *misc.*, University of Oklahoma Library; *The Hieronym Star*, 1877, p. 110 and June, 1878, p. 141.



goods. In the latter event, eastern Ladies Aid Societies sewed the garments from the patterns furnished, and once at Spencer, missionary wives maintained the clothes.<sup>17</sup>

Meals were prepared in the kitchen and served in the dining room attached to the rear of the superintendent's home. A basic meal consisted of meat, sweet potatoes, molasses and "Tom Fuller" (hominy). In season the garden provided a variety of vegetables, particularly at New Spencer. Strawberries and blackberries were abundant in the spring, and wild honey was available year around. Fish, squirrel, and other game were served when caught by the boys, and on special occasions turkey and roasted peanuts were prepared. Peter Hudson, a student after the Civil War, remembered that the boys "lived on beef, corn bread, milk and a cup of coffee. Biscuits were given only on Sunday morning." Another student recalled that the table was set with prunes, rice, sugar, coffee, vegetables, pork, corn, wheat, beef, milk, and butter. During Spencer's existence the diet normally was varied and sufficient, and no cases of malnutrition were ever reported.<sup>18</sup>

Yet the health of the students was not always good, for a family of one hundred boys was fertile ground for most communicable diseases. James Ramsey called doctors from Doaksville to attend the students, but their services were expensive—\$353 for one fifteen-day period. Alexander Reid was his own doctor, mixing and administering medicines, delivering his own and his colleagues' children, freely advising on home medical remedies. He cupped and bled the youngsters and prescribed a teaspoon of brandy for some ailments. He also prescribed for the young wives of the missionary workers, in their illnesses.<sup>19</sup>

Intellectual pursuits were the most significant at Spencer. To facilitate instruction Edmund McKinney originally divided the students into primary, intermediate, and advanced depart-

<sup>17</sup> Ramsey to W. Lawrie, Spencer, 10 June 1846, and Ramsey to D. Wells, Spencer, 24 Dec. 1846, *American Indian*, nos., Box 0, Vol. 2, PHS; Mrs. Lee to Mrs. Woodruff, Spencer, 11 Nov. 1850, Box C31, Colonial Dames Collection, nos., University of Oklahoma Library.

<sup>18</sup> *The Indian Advocate*, Sept. 1847; Mrs. Lee to Mrs. Woodruff, Spencer, 12 May 1861, 4 Nov. 1850, 14 Dec. 1850, and 21 Dec. 1850, Box C34, Colonial Dames Collection, nos., University of Oklahoma Library; "Recollections of Peter Hudson," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, X (Dec. 1932), p. 510; Interview with J. Norman Lenzel, *Indian Pioneer Papers*, Vol. 78, Foreman Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society.

<sup>19</sup> Ramsey to W. Lawrie, Spencer, 10 July 1848, 21 Jan. 1847, Box 0, Vol. 2, and Reid to W. Lawrie, Spencer, 0 April 1851, Box 12, Vol. 1, *American Indian*, nos., Box 12, Vol. 1, PHS; Mrs. Lee to Mrs. Woodruff, 12 Oct. 1850, Box C31, Colonial Dames Collection, nos., University of Oklahoma Library.

ments according to ability to speak and understand English. Alexander Reid, however, classified the students on the basis of age and years spent in school. Subject matter varied from term to term and superintendent to superintendent, but basic courses were reading, writing, spelling and arithmetic. McKinney and James Ramsey also instructed and examined students in Latin, and the library from the first contained Greek and Latin lexicons, Greek grammars, and Latin texts of Horace, Caesar, Virgil, and Cicero. Reid deleted classical instruction maintaining that Latin recitation was folly especially when few understood English. Spencer boys also received instruction in geography, natural philosophy, United States history, algebra, and Bible history, as well as astronomy and vocal music.<sup>40</sup>

Highly educated men provided the instruction at Spencer. Most were graduates of Princeton Seminary and were as well trained as any teachers in the United States. Lane Seminary, Hampton-Sydney, and Columbia Seminary also had graduates at the school. Yet success in teaching was measured by ability to speak English, and gauged by this standard alone, Spencer was a signal failure. After four years of training, some students could not understand simple instructions such as "bring a stick of wood" or "go for a bucket of water." Enrolment in the academy did not improve with experience, for seventy per cent of the students did not understand the language as late as the 1890's.<sup>41</sup>

Judgment of Spencer Academy must not rest entirely upon the success or lack of success of English instruction. The academy demonstrated its value in other areas. In 1848, the six boys selected by the tribe to attend eastern colleges were from Spencer, as were seven of the ten boys sent to Tennessee to learn vocations in 1853. Furthermore, the officers of the Choctaw troops during the Civil War were largely graduates of the national academy. And some of the leading men of the Nation passed through the halls of Spencer. Principal Chiefs B. J. Smallwood, Jefferson Gardner, Allen Wright, Jackson McCurtain, and Gilbert Dukes were all educated here. Judge Charles Vinson, National Treasurer William Wilson, educators Peter Hudson and Simon

<sup>40</sup> *Annual Report, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1843*, 387; Reid to Bureau of Indian Affairs, Spencer, 22 Aug. 1853, Box 12, Vol. 1, and W. Wilson to W. Lowrie, Spencer, 25 Dec. 1845, Box 6, Vol. 2, *American Indian, misc.*, P118; *The Foreign Missionary Chronicle*, October, 1846, 289. See also *Home and Foreign Record*, February, 1851, 27-8; *Report of the United States Indian Inspector for Indian Territory, 1890*, p. 105.

<sup>41</sup> Charles Fishback to W. Lowrie, Spencer, 20 Dec. 1848, *American Indian, misc.*, Box 9, Vol. 2, P118; J. B. Jeter to Board of Education, Nelson, 31 Aug. 1895, Choctaw Schools—Spencer Academy File, Oklahoma Historical Society.

Dwight, Doctor E. N. Wright and the Reverend Frank Hall Wright were trained at Spencer. Gabe Parker, a teacher at Spencer during its last years, Choctaw National Attorney and a member of the committee that provided the Great Seal of Oklahoma, also was a student at the academy. Through these and others the school's influence pervaded the whole tribe.<sup>42</sup>

Thus Spencer Academy stands as an important educational institution among the Choctaws. The tribe was pleased with the school's efforts and generally satisfied with the results. Most agreed with John Hobart Heald, a well-educated Indian trader, that Spencer Academy was "equal to any of the good old schools of New England."<sup>43</sup> To the Choctaws it was a moral and intellectual fountain providing sustenance to a people hungry for civilization.

<sup>42</sup> Silas D. Fisher, Peter Folsom and Thomas LeFlore to Samuel Rutherford, Doakville, 14 Jan. 1858, National Archives, Office of Indian Affairs, Western Superintendency, Letters Received, Microcopy 616, Roll 190; Held to W. Lewis Spencer, 13 Dec. 1852, Box 12, Vol. 1, American Indian, n.s., Box 12, Vol. 1, P118; *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in C.S.A.*, 1862, p. 30.

<sup>43</sup> Muel H. Wright, "John Hobart Heald," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 11 (Sept. 1934), p. 316.