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FINDING THE CHAHTA WITHIN THE CHOCTAW:
A CASE STUDY ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WESTERN EDUCATION
AND CHAHTA PEOPLE

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FINDING THE CHAHTA WITHIN THE CHOCTAW:
A CASE STUDY ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WESTERN EDUCATION
AND CHAHTA PEOPLE

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE
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Yakoke!

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Abstract

This thesis looks at the experiences of Chahta students at Choctaw Academy and Spencer Academy in the late eighteenth century, into the nineteenth century. Through the documentation available in the Western History Collection archive at the University of Oklahoma this thesis offers a brief case study of both schools that explores the unique relationship with western education fostered by Chahta students. Unlike typical Indian boarding schools that were run by the United States government for the purpose of total assimilation, Choctaw boarding schools used a more liberal assimilation-resistant curriculum, and were funded and operated primarily by the Choctaw government. This thesis argues that Chahta students at Choctaw boarding schools found ways to incorporate their traditional values into their daily routine, which created an environment of political and cultural survival for Chatah people. By retaining certain elements of their peoplehood while attending western educational institutions during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Chatah students experienced select useful acculturation of western culture yet resisted total assimilation into western society.

To Begin the Story: Introduction

Research Question

Contemporary Chahta scholar D. L. Birchfield claims, “The Ancient Choctaw people were wise in ways that extend far beyond how to fashion themselves into athletic, attractive people. They were wise enough to figure out how to fashion themselves into whatever they wanted to be” (2007, 12). Western education played a vital role in this chameleon quality of Chahta okla (Choctaw people). For our ancestors, western education offered a window of understanding into the culture of Euro-American society, which allowed for Chahta okla to adapt and change, “fashioning” themselves into thriving contemporary people. This study asks, how were Chahta okla’s experiences with western education different from other Native people and why?

To answer this question, this study explores the past experiences of Chahta okla with western education by looking at two main factors that made Choctaw schools historically unique. First, the Choctaw government retained a great deal of administrative involvement with the schools in their area. Second, the overall curriculum of Choctaw schools fostered a more positive, assimilation resistant environment for students than typical Indian boarding schools. Through an analysis of Choctaw Academy in Kentucky and Spencer Academy in Indian Territory, this study contends that Chahta okla possessed a unique quality of adaptability, that they brought with them to western educational institutions and through which they fostered an environment of positive adaptation rather than culturally destructive assimilation.

Methodology

Every story that is told is a remembering of how things were and a reminder of how they should be. Through this story of Choctaw Academy and Spencer Academy, this study will remember the story of Chahta okla's relationship with western education and remind us of the influence that this relationship had on the "fashioning" of Chahta okla identity, sovereignty, and self-determination. I approach this study from the perspective of a contemporary Chatha student. I do not dream of speaking for every Chahta, everywhere. The interpretations of this study are mine alone and do not reflect the opinions of Choctaw political parties or Chahta elders; however, it is the intent of this study to be useful to all Chahta okla. It is my belief that the experiences of our ancestors in the past directly influence the experiences of our people in the present. It is my hope that this study will remind us of that connection and help us become stronger contemporary Chahta okla.

The primary sources for this study include Choctaw government records such as Choctaw Council resolutions and bills, correspondence between Choctaw Council members and school officials, and quarterly reports by school superintendents. All of my primary source materials were accessed through the Western History Collection archive at the University of Oklahoma. Secondary sources for this study include published theses and dissertations, as well as scholarly publications from the academic fields of history, anthropology, and cultural studies, to name a few. While much of the source material for this study is written from a Eurocentric and paternalistic perspective, it is the intention of this study to analyze these documents with an Indigenous eye and interpret them with an Indigenous perspective in mind.

This study is supported by previously published scholarly sources and archived materials from the University of Oklahoma's Western History Collection. A full exploration of the unique relationship between western education and Chahta okla should include extensive data collection from personal interviews with Chahta okla and close collaboration with Chahta culture keepers, who have experiences with and insights into the history of Chahta education. However, this kind of research is the work of future studies. Unfortunately, the availability of that kind of data is increasingly becoming limited as the carriers of that knowledge are getting older and will not be with us for much longer. I strongly encourage my fellow Chahta students to seek out this valuable information and add to this study's attempt at connecting the gap between our elders and ourselves through the sharing of our stories.

This study only looks at the experiences of two Choctaw schools for boys during the time frame of just before Chahta removal from Mississippi to shortly after. Chahta okla established many schools both for girls and boys across both Mississippi and Indian Territory. The experience of Chahta students at all Choctaw schools is valuable data that should be collected and analyzed by future Chahta scholars. This study is the first installment of many more research projects to come by future Chahta scholars.

This study offers two case studies on the documented experiences of Chahta okla at Choctaw Academy and Spencer Academy. I chose to focus this study on these two all-boys' school case studies, rather than the many girls' schools and co-ed schools operated within Choctaw territory, both before removal and after, for two simple reasons. First, there is an extensive amount of primary documents available involving Choctaw Academy and Spencer Academy, as well as significantly more scholarly

publications discussing these schools. Second, the parameters of this study do not allow for such a broadly encompassing body of research. This study is only the beginning of an extensive amount of research that still needs to be done for the benefit of future Chahta okla.

Understanding the Story: Terms and Concepts

Native/Indigenous/Indian Boarding School

To accurately understand the relationship between Chahta okla and western education, it is first necessary to clarify key concepts and terms that will be used throughout this study. When referring to people who claim territory within the North American continent before European discovery, I will use the terms, Native, Native American, and Indigenous interchangeably. I will only use the term Indian in the context of Indian boarding schools. The term Indian boarding schools is used rather than Native American or Indigenous boarding schools primarily due to the fact that most of these institutions, where not opened or operated in any fashion by Native or Indigenous peoples, were located out of the reach of tribal communities, and operated under a strict assimilation curriculum. This study will attempt to argue that Choctaw schools are significantly different than this example of typical Indian boarding schools.

Assimilation and Acculturation.

Assimilation is to cultural genocide as acculturation is to positive adaptation (Churchill 2004, 6). One involves complete demolition and rebuilding whereas the other involves maintaining the basic foundation and skeleton, while making changing to

the exterior. I use the term acculturation to describe scenarios in which Native students of western educational institutes accepted parts of the western culture, without fully assimilating into the western culture. Where assimilation most often describes an all-or-nothing cultural identity, acculturation describes the possibility of a hybrid or dual cultural identity. This study argues that Chahta okla experienced acculturation at western educational institutes without experiences complete assimilation. Steven Crum explains, “By the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the Choctaw people came to view formalized Euro-American education as a way to interact effectively with white Americans” (Crum 2007, 50). For Chahta okla, western education created more opportunities for nation-to-nation relationship building with the United States, rather than a new lower-class constituent relationship with the United States. An historical example of this idea that Natives were in a lower status within American society can be seen in the Dawes Allotment Act, which used policy language that required “competency” and a certain degree of Indian blood, of native peoples in order to retain the rights to their land. A non-native, white member of American society did not have this same requirement in order to possess land thus creating an environment of inequality (LaVelle 1999).

Michael Garrett, and Eugene Pichette define acculturation as, “The cultural change that occurs when two cultures are in persistent contact” (2000, 6). They go on to explain that assimilation is a form of acculturation. I understand assimilation as the process through which one culture is made dominant over another by “persistent contact”. During assimilation, the members of the dominated culture are expected to accept the dominant culture as their own and forfeit all ties to their original culture. In

Native American Studies this term is often used in conjunction with western education. By forcibly attending Indian boarding schools and learning the language and customs of western culture, colonizing European parties expected Native students to eventually forfeit their traditional cultures and embrace western culture as “naturally superior”. Assimilation from Indigenous cultures to Western culture through public education was a way for the newly formed American government to groom Native American people into a more easily manipulated lower-class status within American society, rather than separate groups of peoples with political and social autonomy, who required nation-to-nation relationships.

Garret and Pichette describe a spectrum of acculturation from traditional, being those who “[m]ay or may not speak English, but generally speak and think their native language; hold only traditional values and beliefs and practice only traditional tribal customs and methods of worship”, to marginal, those who “[m]ay speak both the native language and English; may not, however, fully accept the cultural heritage and practices of their tribal group nor fully identify with mainstream values and behaviors”, to bicultural, those who “simultaneously [are] able to know, accept, and practice both mainstream values/beliefs and the traditional values and beliefs of their cultural heritage”, to assimilated, those who are “[a]ccepted by dominant society, [and] embrace only mainstream cultural values, behaviors and expectations”, to pantraditional, those who are “generally accepted by dominant society but seek to embrace previously lost traditional cultural values, beliefs, and practices of their tribal heritage” (2000, 6).

Through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Chahta okla found themselves somewhere in the middle of this spectrum of acculturation; however, I argue that

Chahta okla never become fully assimilated. While some of the population did assimilate as defined by Garret and Pichette, thus creating generations of individuals who contemporarily fit into the ‘pantraditional’ category, this study argues that a significant amount of Chahta okla stayed between the marginal and bicultural while attending western schools, at least during the time frame in which Choctaw Academy and Spencer Academy were in operation. Evidence from my analysis will reveal that Chahta okla were able to maintain parts of their cultural values and beliefs while attending western schools, which allowed them to form survival mechanisms that allowed for them to “simultaneously [be] able to know, accept, and practice both mainstream values/beliefs and the traditional values and beliefs of their cultural heritage” (Garret and Pichette 2000, 6).

Western Education

I use the term western education to refer to the specific curriculum focused on subjects like literacy, mathematics, philosophy, geography, and law. This curriculum was largely used by American religious organizations to convert Native American youth to Christianity and by the American government to install European social structures into Native American communities. Religious conversion and American cultural dominance historically were correlating powers of colonization. Where one took root within a Native community, the other if not simultaneously, shortly thereafter took root within that community. It is important to note that this religiously and politically charged western education is different than the western education offered to non-Native students. Vine Deloria Jr. explains this distinction, saying,

Education in the English-American context resembles indoctrination more than it does other forms of teaching because it insists on implanting a particular body of knowledge and a specific view of the world, which often does not correspond to the life experiences that people have or might be expected to encounter (Deloria and Wildcat 2001, 42).

The forms of western education that Native peoples were often exposed to were fundamentally designed to erase, or at the very least suppress, Native American peoplehood. For Native people western education almost always equaled an environment of assimilation. David Wallace Adams describes this kind of western education as the “curriculum of civilization.” He explains,

Taught in the proper manner, these subjects would accomplish two things. First, they would introduce Indians to the knowledge of civilization. Second, the curriculum would prepare Indians for citizenship” (1995, 142-143).

Civilization in this context is referring to Western culture, and citizenship is referring to a new lower-class social status for Native peoples. Western educational curriculums, motivated by assimilation, focused every lesson in subjects like mathematics or philosophy, towards manual labor skills and American gender roles. This kind of curriculum was expected to prepare Native students to give up their traditional cultures, accept their new role as an American lower-class citizen, and therefore, no longer offer any resistance to American authority. This study will reveal how the curriculum of Choctaw institutes of western education were different than this assimilation centered form of western education found at most Indian boarding schools.

Western education formed a frustrating Catch 22 for Chahta okla. Accepting information about western culture into their communities opened up opportunities for Native people to operate more easily within a western dominated environment. However, the presence of this assimilation-based western education greatly threatened

traditional values. This study points to evidence of ‘marginal and bicultural acculturation’ rather than assimilation at Choctaw Academy and Spencer Academy, which allowed for Chahta students to navigate the Catch 22 of western education towards a more positive outcome.

Native Education

I have explained the nature of non-Native methods of education for Native peoples as having a religious emphasis resulting in social pacification with the goal of political control. It is important to explain that Native people had successful methods of educating their youth long before Europeans brought their western forms of education to the North American continent. Furthermore, the motivations of such methods were fundamentally different than western methods. The Chahta people have always held education as a vitally important part of their society. Chahta okla traditionally organized socially under a matrilineal system (Akers 2004). Grandmothers were the heads of the household and ensured that each person in their family group had the connections they needed to become responsible members of the community. Male relatives would teach the male children how to be responsible male citizens, and the female relatives would teach the female children how to be responsible female citizens. These gender roles were different from American gender roles, which caused major conflicts between Chahta leadership and American, Eurocentric, policymakers.

Chahta social responsibilities stemmed from the extended family relationships of this matrilineal society. Scholar Daniel Wildcat says,

Learning comes early in indigenous institutions, not through lectures but through experience: customs, habits, and practices. The primary lesson learned

is and was that knowledge and understanding come from our relatives, the other 'persons' or 'beings' we have relationships with and depend on in order to live. And it is through these relationships; physical, psychological, and spiritual, that human beings begin to understand who, why, and to some degree what we are (Deloria and Wildcat 2001, 33).

Knowing who you are, and how you are connected to those around you, teaches you what your responsibilities in life are and how you should behave according to those responsibilities. It is these same social responsibilities, I argue, that motivated Chahta students to attend western schools. Their environment was changing. New "beings" had come into their world, with which a relationship was in need of fostering. Western schools provided the "customs, habits, and practices" through which Chahta okla could continue to "understand who, why, and to some degree what' they are in this new environment. This study highlights elements of these pre-contact traditional methods of education within Choctaw schools and illuminates how Chahta okla fostered this new relationship with their changing environment.

Peoplehood

Regardless of gender, all Chahta education traditionally included a knowledge and understanding of Chahta language, sacred history, ceremonial cycles, and place. This knowledge, combined into an interwoven infinite connection, is coined by Robert K. Thomas as peoplehood (Holm, Pearson, and Chavis 2003). The elements of Chahta peoplehood taught our ancestors how to fulfill their responsibilities to the community. Chahta students brought their peoplehood with them while attending western education. It was the constant variable in their experience of cultural adaptation. This study will explore evidence from the Choctaw Academy and Spencer Academy where Chahta

peoplehood plays a part in the overall relationship between Chahta students and western education. I argue that Chahta okla adapted certain aspects of western culture through their experiences with western education that helped to protect their peoplehood rather than erase it. Through the tools of western concepts like sovereignty and nationhood, Chahta people asserted themselves as an independent political entity rather than a lower-class of American society.

Sovereignty

After European contact the emphasis on responsible community members from Chahta education did not go away all together for Chahta okla. The format of education changed, from a family classroom, to a missionary's classroom, but the purpose for education remained the same for Chahta okla. That purpose was to defend Chahta peoplehood by assert a Choctaw sovereignty and self-determination. The term sovereignty originated with western society, referring to the godly status of the monarchy, who held supreme authority through divine right. It was borrowed by Americans to justify their political actions in North America, and borrowed again, by Indigenous peoples who are attempting to assert themselves in a world that is constantly trying to erase them. From a western/American viewpoint sovereignty is earned and maintained through a strong self-determination; in other words, strong military and economic presence is required for an extended period of time. However, from an Indigenous point of view, it is inherent and infinite, meaning Indigenous peoples were created as separate and distinct groups of people, and remain so with or without the

permission of other groups of people, and with or without any kind of military force or monetary gains. Michael Lerma says,

We assume away aspects of Indigenous sovereignty just as the colonizer wishes Indigenous nations to do. The original manifestations of Indigenous sovereignty are found in Indigenous ceremonies, language, homelands and sacred history (Lerma 2014, 2).

My brief description of Native education suggests that Chahta okla possessed Indigenous sovereignty. Taught through their extended family relationships, Chahta language, history, place, and religion, since time immemorial, have guided Chahta okla to create and enforce rules for survival. However, the American government does not recognize the existence of Indigenous sovereignty as Lerma has defined it. Indigenous sovereignty has not been earned through any rite of passage recognizable in western culture (war, conquest, trade etc.) and therefore is not a valid form of sovereignty.

The history of Indigenous sovereignty is limited by this Eurocentric bias. Lerma explains “Only those aspects of Indigenous sovereignty that also serve the interest of the federal government are defended. All other aspects of Indigenous sovereignty are subject to extinguishing” (Lerma 2014, 4). Chahta okla used Choctaw education as a tool for projecting a form of sovereignty that would not be challenged, or would be less challenged, by the American government. Choctaw education produced Chahta individuals who were well versed in western culture. This seemed to serve the interests of the American government’s goal to assimilate; therefore, Native peoples had shifted the colonizing target finder away from their political anatomy, at least temporarily. Chahta okla and Chahta peoplehood continue to exist with or without the acknowledgement of any form of sovereignty by any other group of people. That being said Indigenous sovereignty can be difficult to manifest if not recognized and supported

by other entities or allies. Choctaw schools and Choctaw governing systems helped make political allies who would potentially support Chahta sovereignty in the future. Created by the American government, with the assistance of the Christian church, to devalue any and all claims to sovereignty made by Native peoples, but used by Native peoples to assert their claims to sovereignty, western education remains a political paradox between American assimilation and Chahta acculturation. Chahta ancestors used western education to acquire specific tools for fending off American colonization. These tools included new concepts like European sovereignty (in contrast to Indigenous sovereignty as defined by Lerma), Choctaw government, and Christianity. This study is the story of how our Chahta ancestors walked the path of western education and how they set out to acquire those specific tools for political survival along the way.

Decolonizing the Story

Chahta and Choctaw

Chahta scholar Donna Akers says,

Those who have no knowledge of a language cannot benefit from the culture knowledge conveyed through learning about that language. Without this knowledge, how can they consider their scholarship complete?" (Akers 2004)

In the spirit of making my scholarship as complete as possible, throughout this study I will use the Chahta language and the ideologies conveyed through it as a theoretical framework for this study. When referring to the people and peoplehood that existed in the southeastern region of the North American continent before European contact and continues to exist today in various regions, I will use the term *Chahta*. *Chahta* is a word used by the people to describe themselves in their native language (Byington

1915). It conveys their identity as a people. *Choctaw* is the anglicized version of the word *Chahta*. I use the term *Choctaw* when referring to organizations involving *Chahta okla* that have been anglicized, that is shifted toward European standards. *Chahta* therefore refers to anything that I interpreted as “traditional” on the acculturation spectrum, where *Choctaw* refers to anything I interpreted as “marginal” or “bicultural” on the acculturation spectrum. For example, I will reference *Chahta students*, in contrast to *Choctaw leadership*. *Chahta students* in this study are *Chahta okla* that are attending a western educational institution. *Choctaw leaders* are *Chahta okla* who have taken on leadership roles within a western style of government. In terms of acculturation they are bicultural leaders, having adopting certain elements of western culture while maintaining elements of *Chahta* culture. I see the *Choctaw* government as an example of positive adoption, having elements of western culture mixed with traditional *Chahta* culture to create a hybrid government through which better nation-to-nation relationships can be fostered, and positive Nation building can take place.

When using the term *Choctaw* in the context of leadership and government, I am emphasizing the colonizing influences that gradually changed the format of government used by *Chahta okla*. Crum says, “Choctaw viewed education as a ‘survival’ tactic in an ever-changing world” (2007, 50). Operating under colonization ideologies, the American government drastically changed the environment surrounding *Chahta okla*. In order to survive in this new environment, *Chahta okla* had to adapt and adjust. To foster a relationship with their new environment, acculturation- the adopting of the *Choctaw* government- was necessary. Whether or not this new relationship was positive or negative is debatable. However, it is worth noting that this relationship is

still being fostered by *Chahta okla* today. Currently one of the largest and wealthiest, tribal communities in North America, it is hard to ignore the acculturated *Choctaw* government, and the relationship it has fostered with the United States and other entities surrounding *Chahta okla*. It is for future studies to more fully unpack that relationship and its effects on *Chahta* peoplehood. This study will only start the conversation by pointing to the moments within *Chahta okla*'s experiences with western education that began the development of this relationship.

Throughout this study I will refer to Choctaw Academy and Spencer Academy as *Choctaw schools*. As the following analysis will reveal, *Choctaw schools*, like the *Choctaw government*, are a unique product of *Chahta okla*'s adaptability. *Choctaw schools* were formatted within western educational standards but involved *Chahta okla* who brought their *Chahta* values into the classroom. The purpose of using the term *Choctaw education* or *Choctaw school* is to emphasize the elements of colonization within this story and actively challenge the audience of this study, myself included, to decolonize the story as it is presented to them. This distinction between *Chahta* and *Choctaw* is not an attempt to chastise or ostracize those *Chahta* individuals who are currently living *Choctaw* lifestyles. It is not my argument here that there is anything wrong with embracing select western ways of doing things. Cultural sharing happens around the world and has both positive and negative results. In the context of this study, however, I am arguing that in order to engage in any kind of useful sovereign agency, which is a primary goal of contemporary *Choctaw leadership*, they must first decolonize the story. We must recognize the difference between that which is *Chahta* (influenced by traditional values of our peoplehood) and that which is *Choctaw*

(influenced by the western world), and understand the ongoing processes of colonization that created the *Choctaw* environment that is, necessary for the survival what is *Chahta*.

Preparing for the Story

Overview of Scholarship

Chahta okla have a long and intricate history with European explorers and settlers. As early as the sixteenth century, Chahta okla and Spanish and French people interacted with each other through cultural and material trade. Many scholars have explored this long and intricate history, most recently James Taylor Carson in 2003 with his book *Searching for the Bright Path: The Mississippi Choctaws from Prehistory to Removal*. The canon scholars for Chahta okla history include (not limited to) Angie Debo (1941, 1961, 1972), Patrick Galloway (1994, 1998, 2006), and Clara Sue Kidwell (1980, 1997, 2008). These scholars have published numerous articles and books over the cultural and political changes of Chahta okla. Donna L. Akers, in 2004 offers a critique of this cannon scholarship in her book, *Living in the Land of Death: The Choctaw Nation, 1830-1860*. Akers takes issue with the Eurocentric nature of most of the work within the scholarly canon of Choctaw history. Her main concern with this pool of scholarship is the bad habit of writing Chahta okla into extinction. Much of this scholarship looks at assimilation as the final chapter for Chahta okla, suggesting that Chahta no longer existed after a certain point in American history, as a result of acculturation and colonization. Similar to Akers, Donald Birchfield offers a somewhat jarring Chahta perspective of Choctaw history in his publications *The Oklahoma Basic*

Intelligence Test: New and Collected Elementary, Epistolary, Autobiographical, and Oratorical Choctologies (1998) and *How Choctaws Invented Civilization and Why Choctaws Will Conquer the World* (2007). Like Birchfield and Akers who contest the Eurocentric assumptions about Chahta okla, this study will add to that developing scholarly counter-narrative regarding the extinction of Chahta okla.

The Narrative of Assimilation

The story of Chahta okla and western education is inherently a political one. During the 1800s and into the 1900s, the primary campaign of the American government was assimilation. Native peoples were no longer a partner in economic growth or strategic military allies; they had become a stubborn obstacle in the way of American's expansion of "civilization" (Carson 2003). In order to remove this obstacle, the American government put into motion an expedient plan of assimilation targeted primarily at Native youth. Many scholars have explored this shift in American government policy towards Native peoples through education. Frederick Hoxie looks at this shift in federal Indian policy in his book, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880-1920* (1984). Hoxie says,

Total assimilation was a goal that combined concern for Native suffering with faith in the promise of America. Once the tribes were brought into 'civilized' society there would be no reason for them to 'usurp' vast tracts of 'underdeveloped' land (Hoxie 1984, 15).

David W. Adams's book *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (1995), offers insight into the curriculum of Indian boarding schools in connection to the "total assimilation" campaign explored by Hoxie. Adams explains,

If Indians were to be prepared for citizenship, if they were to become economically self-sufficient, and if they were to adopt the values and sentiments of American civilization, then they must be instructed to achieve these ends. For this reason, while new recruits were adjusting to life in the total institutions, they were also being introduced to the world of the classroom, and with it, the curriculum of the white man's civilization (Adams 1995, 136).

Boarding schools spread like wildfire across Native communities with the desire to assimilate Native Americans into "citizens" of "civilization". Under slogans like "kill the Indian, save the man," made famous by the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, most Indian boarding schools used any means necessary to achieve this goal of "total assimilation" including physical abuse, starvation, isolation, and physical labor.

Though his research has been pointed to as problematic by the contemporary academic community due to some discrepancies in his cultural affiliations, Ward Churchill offers a useful point of view on Indian boarding schools in his book, *Kill the Indian, Save the Man: The Genocidal Impact of American Indian Residential Schools* (2004). Surveying many boarding schools across the continent, among many different tribal groups, Churchill takes the arguments presented by Hoxie and Adams to the next level. Churchill's research explicitly exposes the extreme negative aspects of boarding schools and connects these traumatic student experiences to actions of genocide by the American government. He says,

In psychological terms, the regimen was deliberately and restlessly brutal. From the moment the terrified and bewildered youngest arrived at the schools, designed as they were to function as 'total institutions,' a comprehensive and carefully-calibrated assault to their cultural identity would commence" (Churchill 2004, 19).

Choctaw schools are in stark contrast to the horrible descriptions Churchill offers in his book. Where Churchill described forced attendance, lack of proper clothing, illness, malnutrition, and inappropriate corporal punishment, Choctaw boarding schools had

ample reports of good health, comfortable living conditions, and overall good relationships between students and teachers. Invested both financially and politically, the Choctaw Nation saw western education as a “nation building” project rather than the “standard approach” of an assimilation project, which created a unique experience with western education for Chahta students (Cornell and Kalt 1998).

While scholars like Churchill, Adams, and Hoxie point to the traumatizing assimilation efforts of government run boarding schools across the continent, other scholars have pointed to less severe experiences with western educational institutions. Michael Coleman in, *The Responses of American Indian Children to Presbyterian Schooling in the Nineteenth Century: An Analysis Through Missionary Sources* (1987), reviews the recorded experience of mission teachers among several missions schools, including Spencer Academy. He also explores the student perspective, in *American Indian Children at School, 1850-1930* (2007). In this book, Coleman looks at the firsthand accounts of boarding school experience by Native students in order to “examine the extent to which the pupil narrators became cultural brokers-mediators-between the white world and their own” (Coleman 2007, xii). These new careers as cultural brokers was the desired results of those tribal leaders who willingly and purposefully sent their children to Indian schools. While this position was often difficult for these students, in that they struggled to find belonging in either culture after graduation, their experiences at boarding school were arguably beneficial in the long run at least in a political way.

A Counter-Narrative to Assimilation

K. Tsianina Lomawaima and Amanda J. Cobb continue in this line of scholarship on Native students as cultural brokers with a more narrowed focus on the southeastern people's experiences with boarding schools. These scholars point to evidence of Native students resisting assimilation rather than becoming passive victims of it. In the introduction of her book, *They Called it Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School* (1995), Lomawaima explains,

This is a story of Indian creativity, adaptability, and resistance to the federal agenda of transformation. Chilocco alumni reveal in their memories of school life how they created a school culture influenced but not determined by the bounds of federal control. This is a story of Indian students-loyal to each other, linked as family and subversive in their resistance (Lomawaima 1995, xi).

Even though Choctaw schools were operated under the oversight of the Choctaw government, they still experienced some pressures of assimilation by the United States government. Similar to Chilocco, Choctaw schools allowed for the development of a unique campus culture that was "influenced but not determined by" those assimilation pressures embedded in western education.

In *Listening to Our Grandmothers' Stories: The Bloomfield Academy for Chickasaw Females, 1852-1949* (2007), Cobb examines the experiences of Chickasaw students at the Bloomfield Seminary. She contends that Bloomfield was a remarkable example of an Indian Boarding School for three main reasons: 1) the superior standard of the school compared to white schools in the area at that time, 2) the length of its operation compared to other Indian schools in the area, and 3) it was a school of higher education reserved for females (Cobb 2007). Like Cobb and Lomawaima, I suggest that Choctaw boarding schools were significantly different than the government Indian

boarding schools researched by scholars like Churchill, Adams, and Hoxie. In this study I look at two main factors that have made Choctaw schools unique. First, the Choctaw government retained a great deal of administrative involvement with the schools in their area. Second, the overall curriculum of Choctaw schools was designed for optimal student academic achievement and positive adaptation over assimilation. Where the typical Indian boarding school held a tactical purpose for the American government and generally produced traumatic reports from Native attendees, Choctaw boarding schools held a tactical advantage for Chahta okla, providing an opportunity for political and cultural assertion in modernity.

Lomawaima and McCarthy expand on the idea of education as a political tool in their book *To Remain an Indian: Lessons in Democracy from a Century of Native American Education* (2006). They point to a paradigm of “safe” Native cultural elements and “not safe” Native cultural elements. This paradigm manifests itself in Indian boarding schools when in some cases, Native languages and traditions were incorporated into the curriculum; and at other times, they were severely punished. They explain,

American Indian education offered powerfully revealing evidence of how each generation, Native and Non-Native, has competed and cooperated to determine where and when Indigenous cultural practices might be considered benign enough to be allowed, even welcomed, within American life” (Lomawaima and McCarthy 2006, 6).

From a sovereignty point of view, the political relationship between the federal government and the Choctaw government is one of “safe” and “unsafe” zones. Any acknowledgement of tribal sovereignty by the federal government was done so with the belief that it was limited enough to not be a threat to American expansionism. For

America, too much acknowledged sovereignty for Chahta okla without the acceptance of “civilization” would place them in the “unsafe zone”, a threat not only to American “progress” but to their own “progress”. Choctaw schools become a useful tool for Chahta leaders to reinforce their international image as “safe.”

While the majority of this book points to evidence of this “safe/unsafe” paradigm and how it influenced tribal and federal government relationships in boarding schools and public schools in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, their arguments are relevant to the examples of nineteenth century Choctaw boarding schools in this study as well. From my research, Choctaw boarding schools have proved to be the “safe zones” of Indian educations. Students were allowed to practice certain parts of their culture in unison with American culture at both Choctaw Academy and Spencer Academy, which made them largely popular, not only among Chahta parents, but Native parents from neighboring tribes. Enrollment censuses from Choctaw Academy and Spencer Academy show an increased number of students each year from other tribes such as Potawatomie, Miami, Quawpaw and Creeks (Quarterly Report 1833)

A Choctaw Narrative

Many scholars, a few of whom I have mentioned here, have done extensive research on the overall topic of Indian education both past and present. Much of this broader scholarship can be used in context with Chahta okla; however, there is a need for more Chahta specific research. Few have focused specifically on Chahta education. Furthermore, the research that has been done largely comes from the graduate college or University Press of the University of Oklahoma. David Baird published his master’s

thesis *Spencer Academy: The Choctaw "Harvard", 1842-1900* (1965), his Ph.D. dissertation *Peter Pitchlynn: Choctaw delegate* (1969) and a book *Pitchlynn: Chief of the Choctaws* (1972), all at the University of Oklahoma. Baird speaks to the development of Choctaw Academy and Spencer Academy, where Choctaw leaders held major roles. Baird also explained the political factionalism between traditionalist, those who wished to see a full separation of Choctaw tradition from western ways, and the progressives, those who saw acculturation and adaptability as the key to a Choctaw future in an inevitably white world. This study will explore some of the ways this factionalism was a factor in the founding and daily operations of Choctaw schools.

Other scholars have also focused their research on Choctaw Academy. Ella W. Drake, expands on Baird's work on Peter Pitchlynn and his role in Choctaw schools, in her articles "Choctaw Academy: Richard M. Johnson and the Business of Indian Education" (1993), and "A Choctaw Academy Education: The Apalachicola Experience, 1830-1833" (2000). Ronald L. Pitcock offers an analysis of literacy education at Choctaw Academy in his article, "Regulating Illiterates: Uncommon Schooling at the Choctaw Academy, 1825-1848" (2001). Pitcock says that Choctaw Academy was an experiment by the United States government to "discover whether young Native Americans could absorb the neoclassical, civic-minded literacy of common school lessons without expecting democratic privileges" (Pitcock 2001). This study will explore how this school failed the United States assimilation hypothesis and proved the Choctaw Nation's acculturation hypothesis.

Where Baird, Drake, and Pitcock offer studies focused primarily on Choctaw Academy in Kentucky, other scholars have compiled studies over several Choctaw

boarding schools. Myrtle Drain's dissertation at the University of Oklahoma, *A History of the Education of the Choctaw and Chickasaw Indians* (1928), is one of the first formal scholarly investigations of Choctaw education. Drain offers a general overview of Choctaw and Chickasaw history, with an emphasis on the activities of missionaries and missions schools. She divides this history into five main categories: pre-European contact to European colonization, pre-removal to treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, removal to Civil War, post-Civil War to statehood and, present day to future. Similar to Drain, Eloise Spear focused her dissertation at the University of Oklahoma, *Choctaw Indian Education with Special Reference to Choctaw County, Oklahoma* (1977), more specifically on Choctaw education post removal, looking at the progression of Choctaw education from elementary day schools, to secondary boarding schools to the merging into the Oklahoma public school system after statehood.

All of these scholars make up a large portion of this study's bibliography. Along with these sources, I use primary source documents from the Western History Collection archive at the University of Oklahoma. While all of these scholars do extensive work in pointing out the facts as they are documented about Choctaw education, few do any kind of scholarly analysis of those facts. This study will add to the overall literature on the subject of Indian boarding schools in general as well as specifically Choctaw schools by revealing the unique qualities of Choctaw schools that allowed for them to be epicenters of Choctaw social and political survival rather than factories of cultural genocide and political domination.

Listening to the Story

Treaties for Education

In 1820, *The Treaty of Doak's Stand* was negotiated and ratified by leaders of the Choctaw Nation and representatives of the United States of America. This treaty was the first of a series of treaties in which the Choctaw Nation negotiated language that would protect future generations of Chahta okla from “total assimilation” (Carson 2003). In the preamble of *The Treaty of Doak's Stand*, it reads,

Whereas it is an important object with the President of the United States, to promote the civilization of the Choctaw Indians, by the establishment of schools amongst them; and to perpetuate them as a nation by exchanging, for a small part of their land here, a county beyond the Mississippi River [...]” (Treaty 1820).

The language “promote the civilization” indicates the assimilation policies of the American government. As Hoxie, Adams, Churchill, and others have suggested, the transition into “civilization” required a forfeiture of tribal culture. The main difference between the schools of Hoxie, Adams, and Churchill’s research is the proximity to the tribal community. In the *Treaty of Doak's Stand*, there is language that brings the school to the students rather than the students to the school. Furthermore, “to perpetuate them as a Nation” points to the development of a Choctaw government under which Chahta okla may more easily engage in a nation-to-nation relationship with the United States.

In exchange for a portion of their lands, the Choctaw Nation accepted financial support for the purpose of educating Chahta okla. By creating language found in *The Treaty of Doak's Stand*, Chahta leadership made the first move in a “long con” strategy towards strengthening Choctaw government and Chahta peoplehood. By learning the

English language and culture, Chahta okla acquired a tool with which they could establish stronger political agency and continue to “perpetuate themselves as a nation.” Chahta leaders under the banner of the Choctaw Nation government signed *The Treaty of Washington City* in 1825. This treaty also includes specific language that provided for educational services for Chahta students. Article two of *The Treaty of Washington City* reads,

The United States do hereby agree to pay the said Choctaw Nation the sum of six thousand dollars, annually, forever; it being agreed that the said sum of six thousand shall be annually applied, for the term of twenty years, under the direction of the president of the United States, to the support of schools in said nation, and extending to it the benefits of instruction in the mechanic and ordinary arts of life, at the expiration of twenty years, it is agreed that the said annuity may be vested in stocks, or otherwise disposed of, at the option of the Choctaw Nation (Treaty 1825).

For the United States government, this treaty was a means to an end. Operating on an ideology of the inevitable disappearance through assimilating education, the American signatories of this treaty agreement and their superiors, no doubt saw the “forever” obligation of this agreement to eventually void itself out. The money spent by the federal government to support the required “instruction in the mechanic and ordinary arts of life” would be money well spent, towards their end goal of creating lower-class American citizens. If assimilation was a success, then the language requiring financial support to the “nation” for “forever” or “twenty years” would be a moot point.

These “mechanical and every day arts” that western education would provide were an important part of Chahta okla’s survival plan. Demanding federal funding for “twenty years” points to the resistance of Chahta okla against “total assimilation.” They did not plan on disappearing any time soon. On the contrary, they planned on being Chahta “forever.” After the allotted twenty years of school funding was up, this section

of the treaty reminds the United States government that there will still be a nation-to-nation relationship that they will have to maintain after Chahta okla end their time in western schools.

The *Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek*, signed in 1830 was arguable one of the most difficult treaties for Chahta okla to enter into. Crum explains,

The Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek proved to be a mixed blessing. If it paved the way for tribal removal, which the Choctaw viewed as something negative, it also had other provisions, which benefited them; one was a higher education provision (Crum 2007, 49).

Not fully defeated, Chahta Oklah continued to plan for their survival using what materials they had. Article twenty of the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek reads,

The United States agree and stipulate as follows, [...] there shall be [...], forty Choctaw youths, for twenty years. This number shall be kept at school; and as they finish their education others, to supply their places shall be received [...]; also, a church, for each of the three districts, to be used as school houses, until the Nation may conclude to build others: and for these purposes, ten thousand dollars shall be appropriated. Also fifty thousand dollars (viz.) twenty-five hundred dollars annually shall be given for the support of three teachers of schools for twenty years (Treaty 1830).

Again there is language that implies prolonged access to western education, which suggests prolonged existence of Chahta students to benefit from it. This article also emphasis the academically-focuses, assimilation-resistant, curriculum used by Chahta okla in their schools. With the desire to move away from church based schools once the funds are available, and the required funding of teachers' salaries, that are expressed in this treaty, the plans for a unique Choctaw educational system were put in place.

Based on language found in Choctaw treaties, it seems reasonable to assert that Chahta leaders had a sense of what the future of their relationship with the Unites States government might hold and recognized the necessity for a Choctaw education in order

to establish a more politically stable relationship with the United States. Chahta leaders, though divided on how to deal with their current political situation, understood that the overwhelming encroachment of American culture was inevitable. For the most part they all agreed that education was a key component to dealing with that situation. In order to allow for future generations of Chahta to be able to learn and use the American's weaponized paternalistic political rhetoric for their own survival purposes, Chahta treaty signatories made sure that an access to a Choctaw education was available to them. Choctaw leaders set in motion the opportunity to maintain Chahta peoplehood through the tools of Choctaw nationhood and sovereignty. The funds that were secured through these early acts of Choctaw sovereignty (signing treaties as the western formatted Choctaw Nation) were used to establish the first major, formally organized, western educational institutes in Choctaw country. Among these early institutes were Choctaw Academy and Spencer Academy.

Choctaw Academy

One of the main concerns among Chahta leadership in regards to education was the location of their schools. Leaders like Greenwood Leflore, David Folsom, and Pushmataha supported small, local day schools, over which the Choctaw Council could more easily manage. As early as 1802 several day schools were scattered across Chahta country, including Skullybille, Holetushi, Lupta Bok, Pine Grove, and San Bois (McKee 1980). For the most part these early schools were primary schools that offered conversational English language and limited literacy lessons. What stands out the most about these early day schools was their location close to the students' homes, and the

bilingual curriculum. Literacy was encouraged in both the Chahta language and the English language, which encouraged students to find a balance between the two languages and their corresponding cultures. The close proximity to the Chahta communities allowed for the students to return home to their families each night and allowed for them to avoid the side effects of isolation and home sickness that were common in long distance boarding schools.

There is limited scholarship on these early neighborhood schools. From the scholarship I was able to access, it seems that, while these early day schools were successful in keeping student morale high and Chahta culture values close, they were limited in their ability to prepare their students to navigate through western society. Leaders like Peter P. Pitchlynn, Mushulatubbe and Robert Cole, who were major figureheads of the progressive Chahta political faction, felt that the best way for Chahta youth to become the best possible future leaders in a world largely dominated by western culture was for them to have exposure to as much western culture as possible at western educational institutions (Carson 1999, 129). Pitchlynn encountered firsthand the disadvantages of Chahta leaders who did not have a full understanding of American social protocols and political processes. He served as a translator for the negotiations of several early land session treaties between Chahta leadership and the United States (Baird 1968). Feeling that his people were treated unfairly due to their ignorance of the proceedings, he pushed for a western education for Chahta youth including his own children who were among the first class to attend Choctaw Academy. Pitchlynn wanted his people to be recognized as the great nation he knew them to be and saw western education as a means to that end. Choctaw scholar Thurman Lee Hester Jr., asks, “How

can I attest to that which I haven't experienced?" Hester coined this kind of leadership as a context based "Choctaw excellence" (Hester 2004, 183). Peter Pitchlynn argued that Chahta youth needed as much cultural context as possible in order to be the most efficient future leaders of their people. Neighborhood primary schools were simply not enough to achieve this goal.

Peter Pitchlynn, inspired by his own experiences with western education and driven by a "Choctaw excellence," partnered with U.S. Senator Richard M. Johnson to found Choctaw Academy in 1825 at Great Crossing near Georgetown, Kentucky. The school was financed primarily by \$6,000 of funds received from the Treaty of Washington City, and Johnson donated the use of his Farm in Kentucky for the campus. While Johnson rallied federal allies for the school, Pitchlynn rallied Chahta allies for the school and recruited the first class of Choctaw Academy from the families of his neighbors as well as from his own family. Choctaw Academy was uniquely organized in comparison to other Indian boarding schools. Until its closing in 1845 Choctaw Academy operated under the three part cooperation of the Choctaw Council, who determined the school's budget and elected the board of trustees who oversaw the general conditions of the campus; missionary organizations, who offered a standardized western curriculum and experienced teachers to teach it; and the federal government, who helped fund staff salaries from its "civilization fund" and offered political support for the school's continued operation. In this way Choctaw Academy was a first of its kind (Carson 1999, 83). Norman Oppelt explains,

Although Choctaw Academy was supported and to some degree administrated by the Baptist church, it was not a typical missionary school. Its program and operation were quite different from other missionary schools, and there was much involvement of the Choctaw leaders in its administration" (1990. 8).

Primary sources from the Western History Collection at the University of Oklahoma reveal three major themes at Choctaw Academy. As Oppelt explains, the first two themes were active involvement of the Choctaw Council in the school's administration and the different curriculum offered at the school. The third theme is the overall lack of Christian influence on the students, which is a result of the combined efforts of the first two themes.

Unlike other Indian Boarding schools, Choctaw Academy was less concerned with the Christian conversions and assimilation and more concerned with academic advancement and necessary acculturation. A quarterly report in 1840 declared approximately 50 students had converted to Christianity during their time at the school (Quarterly Report, 1840). Having only about half of the total student population formally converted to Christianity points to a lack of emphasis on religion at the school. In a report in November 1835, the current superintendent of the school reported his concern for the religious instruction of the students, emphasizing that he required regular attendance in Sunday school for all of the students and his frustration in getting the students to engage in religious instruction outside of the Sunday School classroom (Quarterly Report, 1835). In another report in October 1839, the superintendent of Choctaw Academy reported an overall lack of interest in any religious instructions by the students (Quarterly Report, 1839). This general lack of religious emphasis I see as stemming from the school's unique curriculum.

The curriculum of Choctaw Academy included English, grammar, geography, writing, arithmetic, practical surveying, astronomy, natural philosophy, history, moral philosophy, and vocal music (Drake 2000). This list of subjects was standard among

most Indian schools; however, Choctaw Academy offered these subjects through a bilingual program. As a result of this liberal bilingual policy at Choctaw Academy, a report in 1833 listed at least seven students as advanced in geography, history, natural philosophy, algebra, moral philosophy, and grammar. He also reported a high interest in vocal music and public speaking extracurricular activities (Quarterly Report, 1833). Singing and public speaking are two activities that are taught to young Chahta okla in their traditional communities. The presence of their language mixed with anglicized version of traditional activities like singing is evidence that Choctaw Academy was not your average assimilation factory. This new Choctaw curriculum remained a vital part of the school's operation. In the school's final year, 1845, a letter to Petter Pitchlynn from Superintendent Wade reports that the school still held a heavily bilingual program. Wade notes about sixty-three students as fully "English scholars" and twenty nine students as "Choctaw scholars" and notes lessons in grammar and arithmetic in both the English language and Chahta language (Wade, 1845).

Superintendents of Choctaw Academy boast of the progress of students in almost every report available. In a report in April 1832, the superintendent writes,

The teachers are faithful and industrious using every possible measure to cultivate the minds, morals and manners of the youth under them. Indeed this institution requires much more attentions and labor than would be necessary in a common school for white children" (Quarterly Report, 1832).

Though he does not directly say it in this report, I interpret this higher level of attention as a clue to the higher quality of learner made available to Chahta students through the incorporation of the Chahta language. The increased labors of the teachers in that case would be referring to the bilingual instruction of each lesson. Other reports have language describing the "strict attitudes" of the students in regards to their learning and

the relationship among the campus population as being “treated with the greatest friendship and respect” (Quarterly Report, 1832). Overall the reports of student achievement at Choctaw Academy are positive and optimistic. Of course, the possibility of these reports being slightly self-serving and propagandized by the superintendents who wrote them exists. Little evidence is available however, that suggests anything contrary to these reports. The Choctaw Council conducted their own regular investigation into the conditions of the school and repeatedly passed council resolutions that accepted the quarterly reports to be true and honest. From the records it seems clear that the Choctaw Council held the final authority of whether Choctaw Academy remained open. If their investigations ever came back in a negative light, it stands to reason that the board of trustees, backed by the Choctaw Council would have taken immediate action.

From the data provided in quarterly reports, it becomes clear that Choctaw Academy was distinctly different in that it adopted a bilingual curriculum with minimal religious emphasis, which encouraged academic achievement without sacrificing cultural attachments. This uniqueness in curriculum would not have been possible without the detailed involvement of Chahta leadership. From the very fact that quarterly reports to both the secretary of war of the U.S. and the Choctaw Council were required, it is obvious that the administrations of Choctaw Academy was uniquely different from other Indian schools. It was the goal of the Choctaw government to create an institution where Chahta youth could learn English and become proficient in western social protocols while maintaining Chahta values. Encouraging a bilingual educational environment was the first step in achieving that goal. Besides reporting on

the academic situation of the students, these mandatory quarterly reports identified the physical and mental health of the students, as well as the conditions of the campus. This shows how deeply involved Choctaw leadership was in the regular operations of the school. Other Indian schools did not have the luxury of a checks and balances system that these quarterly reports offered for Choctaw Academy. In most U.S. government run facilities, there was little power invested in the tribal communities from which the students came to stop common practices of physical abuse, malnutrition and other atrocities (Churchill 2004). Thus the experiences of Chahta and other Native students at Choctaw Academy were fundamentally different. Chahta students enjoyed an environment in which their traditional cultures could “safely” co-exist with western culture (Mcarthy and Lomawaima 2006).

The Choctaw Academy in Kentucky was the direct product of Peter Pitchlynn’s educational ambitions. He was largely responsible for the assimilation resistant environment that the above analysis of Choctaw Academy has revealed. He ensured the Choctaw Academy enlisted qualified teachers and that they taught a curriculum of western education on par with that of non-Indian schools while allowing room for cultural diversity, rather than a curriculum of subservient class-hood and gender roles that incorporated Chahta okla as a newly established lower-class of American society. Ella Drake describes Choctaw Academy saying,

The Choctaws envisioned Choctaw Academy as an elite academic institution where promising youths would pursue advanced studies and acquire the skills needed to assume civic responsibilities in a Nation confronted by an expanding white population (Drake 1993, 260).

This school was the first steps in setting the bar high for Chahta students' success, while also sowing the seeds for what this study defines as Choctaw education and Choctaw sovereignty: tools of Chahta survival.

Choctaw Academy operated during a delicate political situation. At any moment what little amount of political autonomy Chahta okla had left could be destroyed. This anxiety caused the Chahta community to make any and all decisions with great caution. Western educational intuitions for Chahta students were not exempt from this social and political caution. While Pitchlynn remained optimistic about the school, community members continued to have their doubts about Choctaw Academy. A letter from the General House Council to Peter Pitchlynn after his confirmation as superintendent of Choctaw Academy expresses the overall attitude towards institutions like Choctaw Academy. The letter reads,

We feel it is our duty to say that we hope you will use every possible attempt to guard and watch over the interests of the institutions and carry out the views and wished of the Choctaw people. For it is the earnest and greatest desire of our Nation that our youth be raised up in steady and moral habits" (Juzan, McKinney, and James 1840).

While Chahta okla clearly wanted a positive experience for their children at Choctaw Academy, many maintained concerns about Pitchlynn's involvement that stemmed from the ongoing factional issues among the Chahta community. From a traditionalist point of view, Pitchlynn had developed a problematic reputation among his community for having embraced western ways in forfeit of Chahta ways. Those who wanted to see a hard and fast isolation of Chahta culture feared that exposing their children to the curriculum supported by Pitchlynn would corrupt them and make them forget their roots. Historian David Baird channels this community criticism of Pitchlynn's

enthusiasm for western education saying, “Altogether his training reinforced his white background and separated him even further from the traditional Indian pattern” (Baird 1972, 21) Fearing this influence, traditionalists targeted the Choctaw Academy and Pitchlynn’s active role within it. Charging him with greed and corruption, his combatants pointed to his substantial self-appointed salary for serving as primary teacher at the school as well as school board member. This salary was quite a bit larger than the other employees and came from the overall budget of the school, which was money allocated to the Choctaw Nation from their treaties with the United States government -- treaties he played a role in seeing signed and ratified. For some this looked like a wealthy mixed blood elitist lining his pockets at the expense of the Chahta community. However, when partnering religious administration made changes in the curriculum from an academic focus to a labor and class focus, Pitchlynn immediately withdrew from his paid position within the school and withdrew all of the original Choctaw students in attendance to boycott the changes (Drake, 2000).

Senator Johnson took on Pitchlynn as a partner in founding the school because Pitchlynn portrayed himself as an assimilated Choctaw, a major point of criticism from his Chahta community. I argue, however, that rather than becoming fully assimilated through his experiences with Western education, Peter Pitchlynn became “bicultural” acculturated. He saw his own western education and the proliferation of western education among his people as a powerful tool that could be used to cultivate Choctaw self-determination and political anatomy. The incorporation of the Chahta language into the school’s curriculum helped protect the school from the cultural corruption

feared by traditionalist community members, and eventually the majority of the Chahta community came to support Choctaw Academy and all Pitchlynn desired it to achieve.

In the long view, Pitchlynn recognized the overall benefits to a school like Choctaw Academy as outweighing some of the negative aspects of the school, such as the prolonged separation of the students from their families and communities.

Pitchlynn's outlook on Choctaw education stemmed from his understanding that, in Euro-American culture, the richest and most educated males were recognized as having authority to make law and engage in international negotiations. This is different from how Choctaw leaders were traditionally elected. Female family elders selected leaders based on their proven abilities and community recognition rather than on book smarts or monetary status (Birchfield, 2007). This significant clash in leadership ideologies made it difficult for Choctaw and American, nation-to-nation negotiations to take place.

Recognizing this political stalemate that was causing his people so many major setbacks, Peter Pitchlynn encouraged Chahta youth to acquire these higher levels of western education that the Euro-Americans deemed a necessary trait for leadership so that they could return to their people and more effectively lead. From Pitchlynn's point of view, it would be difficult for Euro-American leaders to dismiss Choctaw Nation leaders as unfit for making policy decisions if they held all of the same leadership qualities that the Euro-American leaders held. Having a Western education allowed for Chahta leadership to stand on a more equal footing with their intrusive neighbors.

Through Choctaw education, leaders like Pitchlynn envisioned a more strongly protected Chahta peoplehood.

While some Chahta remained opposed to institutions like Choctaw Academy, Pitchlynn's tireless efforts within his own community to garner support for the school eventually won over the support of the governing council and the large portion of the Chahta community. However, Americans developed their own concerns about the school. Their reservations point to the true overall achievement of Pitchlynn's goal for the school. Hoping the school would escalate the national campaign of assimilation, American politicians were disappointed with the overall lack of assimilation produced from the school during its nineteen years of operation. According to McKee and Schlenker, "Because the missions had taught the Indians that their land could not legally be taken from them, the War Department and the citizens of Mississippi pushed for government reprisal" (1980). By 1830, which was the beginning of the removal process for Chahta okla, all federal support, both political and financial, had been withdrawn from Choctaw Academy. Shortly after removal, the Choctaw Council also redirected its treaty funds to support other educational institutions closer to their new location. Choctaw Academy had served its purpose for Chahta okla. Chahta students had taken what was useful to them from the academic experience and returned home as empowered politicians and activists; Choctaws leaders engaged in Chahta survival.

Choctaw Academy remained a safe haven for Chahta youth during the devastating time of removal. Many parents sent their children to the school to stay, rather than walk the Nowa Falaya, also known as the Trail of Tears, to Indian Territory. Also, Chahta okla who refused to leave their traditional homelands in Mississippi, who would later be known as the Mississippi Band of Choctaws, also sent their children to the school, in the hopes that they might avoid the aggressive persecution from

Mississippi citizens who had hopes of settling on Chahta lands (Spear, 1977). Choctaw Academy officially closed its doors to all students in 1845. While Choctaw Academy slowly deteriorated after the removal of Chahta okla to Indian Territory due to the withdrawal of administrative support and funding, Chahta okla had not given up their passion for education after removal. If anything, their desire to train their youth to be better prepared to interact with the United States increased after the removal's devastating blow to their political agency.

Spencer Academy

David Baird coined Spencer Academy the "Choctaw Harvard" (1965, 3). The Chahta people hoped that Spencer Academy would do for the Chahta youth what America's Harvard did for American youth. That is, it would raise their social recognition to agents of intellectual authority. It was Chahta okla's understanding, from many years of international relationship building with Europeans, that intellectual authority directly corresponded to political authority. Therefore, the more Chahta youth who attended Choctaw schools the greater the chances of future Chahta leaders holding a stronger political authority in the American political system, thus wielding more political power to enforce Chahta peoplehood, through Choctaw sovereignty.

Upon arrival in Indian Territory in 1830-31, one of the first orders of business for Chahta okla was education. An early group of Chahta travelers known as the "Six Towns," led by district chief Thomas Leflore set up a community in what is now McCurtain County. Leflore gave special permission to Rev. Alfred Wright to join the "Six Towns" in their new home for the purpose of running a neighborhood school.

Wright founded Wheelock Academy for girls in 1833 (Drain, 1928). This was just the start of a proliferation of mission schools in the new Choctaw country.

Chahta okla remained actively involved with their children's exposure to western education. Records indicate that in 1842, the Choctaw Council passed a bill to establish Spencer Academy about ten miles north of Doaksville, the new capital of the Choctaw Nation after settling in the southeastern corner of Indian Territory. Much like its predecessor in Kentucky's relationship with the Baptist church, Spencer Academy was administered jointly by representatives of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions and the Choctaw Nation Council; however, the board of missions did not get involved with Spencer Academy until a few years after its opening. Originally, the school was solely operated by the Choctaw Council and almost fully funded by the Choctaw Council. Only \$2,000 from the board of missions, and about \$1,000 from the United States 'civilization fund' combined with the significantly larger sum of \$6,000 from Choctaw treaty annuities became the early budget for the academy, totaling, \$8,833 (Baird, 1985). Like with the Choctaw Academy, the board of trustees for Spencer Academy was elected by the General Council of the Choctaw Nation; however, where Choctaw Academy seemed to not have much oversight from the United States government, Spencer Academy had more documented interaction with the United States. This is first evident from the name sake of the school, Secretary of War John C. Spencer. Secondly, United States Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) agent in charge of Choctaw Nation affairs, William Armstrong, served as trustee of the board for Spencer Academy. Though he was considered a friend to Chahta okla, Armstrong ultimately represented the interests of the United States in his oversight of the school.

Furthermore, U.S. involvement increased through their partnership with the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions. The Presbyterian Church was heavily involved among Native American communities for many years. As part of the American government's campaign to erase Native American cultural and social autonomy through assimilation, the Presbyterian Church was a key player with their religious conversion efforts. Native youth being the prime target for accelerated conversation, the Presbyterian Church sent 450 missionaries to staff Indian boarding schools between 1837 and 1893, making it the an ideal partner for achieving the Americans' goal (Coleman 1987, 415). Despite this increase in non- tribal investments (both finical and administrative), Spencer Academy still held similar qualities to Choctaw Academy as a unique Native experience with western education. I interpret this increase in interest by the federal government as a result of the Choctaw Academy's successes at creating well informed Chahta individuals. Part of the reason why the United States withdrew its support of Choctaw Academy, in the end, was the resulting educated Chahta who not only were able to recognize when they were getting treated unfairly, but were able to do something about it. These Chahta okla armed with the knowledge of how to navigate western culture, posed a significant threat to the American's plans for "total assimilation", thus warranting a closer eye by American administrators.

Unlike Choctaw Academy, that seemed to have relatively constant leadership staff, Spencer Academy went through three superintendents over the course of only a few years. Upon recommendation by William Armstrong, Edmund McKinney (non-Native) was appointed as the first superintendent of the academy. McKinney was an

established reverend and teacher at a Creek Indian school prior to his appointment (Baird 1965, 6) Superintendent McKinney's first actions within his duty, were to delay the start date of the first semester due to lack of essential supplies and to serve as the mediator for a pre-existing personal conflict between Board of Trustee President Peter. P. Pitchlynn (the same Pitchlynn who was actively involved in Choctaw Academy) and his nephew Jacob Folsom, who was the acting caretaker of the school until McKinney could take up his position (Baird 1965, 7). This conflict that McKinney found himself in the middle was the manifestation of a deeper social and political issue among the Chahta community at the time: the factionalism between the traditionalists and the progressives. This was the same political conflict that caused the Choctaw Academy to receive the criticism it did from certain Chahta groups in its beginning. Along with internal disputes, which he lacked the ability to comprehend as an outsider to the community, McKinney faced the issue of managing the budget for the school. The funding for the school was limited, but the need for supplies increased steadily the longer the school was in operation, causing a significant amount of debt to accumulate. Much like his inability to mediate the conflicts between his board members, McKinney had little power to address the debt concerns of the school. The majority of the money for the budget came from Choctaw Nation council bills, while the power to allocate the budget rested solely with U.S. agent Armstrong; however, the responsibility and blame for the debt largely rested on McKinney's shoulders.

Overwhelmed by the burdens of his positions, McKinney resigned in 1845 (Baird 1965, 8). Before leaving he put forth the motion to incorporate more religious administrative involvement. Frustrated with the political disputes between committee

members and the inconsistent management of funding, McKinney called for the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Mission to get involved with the daily administration of the school. McKinney hoped for a more centralized, and religiously organized administrative presence on campus. The same year as this push for administrative change at Spencer, the Choctaw council had fully withdrawn all support from Choctaw Academy in Kentucky, focusing all of their attention on the administration of Spencer Academy and other schools in Choctaw country.

After much deliberation and investigation into the best course of action, on October 7, 1845, the Choctaw Council transferred administrative control of Spencer Academy to the Presbyterian board. U.S. politician Walter Lowrie commented on this change, saying, “With these advantages, and with the blessing of God, the youth of the Choctaw Nation would rise to a perfect equality with any portion of the United States” (Baird 1965, 10). With this transfer of control came an additional \$2,000 of funding from the Board, along with established and experienced teachers and administrators to populate the school. Along with the potential for an increase in budget and stronger organization of the school, the academic credibility that the board of missions offered became a factor in the Choctaw Council’s final decision to shift administrative control.

The core curriculum of Spencer Academy, under the administration of the board of missions, included an emphasis on literacy and European standards of education. This was the same sort of curriculum that Pitchlynn had seen prove to be so successful with his students at Choctaw Academy and that he continued to champion with his seat as president on the Board of Trustees for Spencer Academy. Michael Coleman explains,

[...] with a heavy influence on rote learning and recitation, the school at its best provided on impressively wide academic curriculum: English, arithmetic, algebra, history, geography, chemistry, botany, philosophy, natural philosophy, natural history, Latin, Greek, and sometimes for pragmatic reasons literacy in tribal languages (2007, 475).

I argue that this aspect of the curriculum was the most appealing to the Choctaw Council. Having access to subjects like math and reading, in the English language would allow for Chahta youth to better converse with Americans on issues of territorial claims, law, law enforcement, jurisdiction etc. Also, like at Choctaw Academy, the use of bilingual lessons aided in student academic achievement and allowed for an environment of positive adaptation rather than damaging assimilation.

As I mentioned briefly with the vocal music classes at Choctaw Academy, the subjects of this western curriculum were not totally foreign subjects for Chahta okla. Prior to western education, they had ways of teaching their youth about their natural environment (botany, and geography), and ways of teaching their youth about concepts of being and thought (philosophy and religion). These subjects manifested themselves in traditional Chahta classrooms through the lived curriculum of Chahta peoplehood and by the teachers of the extended family of a matrilineal social structure. I interpret the desire to attend schools with a curriculum like that offered by the board of missions, as a way to prove to their encroaching American neighbors, that they were capable of autonomy and agency according to the American standards. Spencer Academy students learned how to shift their traditional knowledge to imitate just enough of western culture to increase to some degree their political autonomy. Chahta okla possessed many of the elements of the “superior culture” of America; they simply used that same knowledge in different ways and to different ends. By attending schools like Spencer

Academy and Choctaw Academy, and excelling at the western curriculum offered under the administration of the Board of Foreign Missions, Chahta students had a chance to prove that they could acculturate without assimilating.

With increased funding, a better organized campus, and a curriculum that could prove to be of a major political benefit to Chahta okla, the decision of the Choctaw Council was made swiftly. They were eager for past educational benefits to continue and for a positive change in the current situation of their constituents. On Jun 1, 1846, Reverend James Ramsey (non-native) accepted control of Spencer Academy as the second superintendent, under the administration of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions. Ramsey was a thirty-one-year-old Princeton graduate and ordained minister from New Jersey (Baird 1965, 11). Ramsey was qualified for the position from three difference perspectives. From the Chahta perspective he was an authority in western education, having acquired a western higher education degree from Princeton. From the Board of Mission's perspective he was an authority on religion, being an ordained minister. Finally, from the perspective of the federal government, he was an authority on American culture. Having lived in New Jersey for most of his life, and therefore having little exposure to Native Americans and little sympathy for their ways of life, Ramsey was the perfect candidate to perpetuate the American campaign for "total assimilation". This combination of qualities made him an interesting candidate for superintendent of Spencer Academy. Unlike the superintendents of Choctaw Academy, who either came from a Native connection or a U.S. federal connection, Ramsey was a choice that was potentially helpful all parties involved. Each party saw Ramsey as a

good addition to their investment in the school, while each of these investors held significantly different results in mind from the school.

In his first order of business, Ramsey postponed reopening the school until the \$3,000 overdrawn budget was balanced. A combination of wealthy parental donations and Choctaw Council's increased allowance to the school's budget settled the school's outstanding debt so that the school could be reopened as soon as possible. The fact that Ramsey went to the Choctaw Council for help with this budget crunch, rather than the board of missions or the federal government, to me shows how Chahta okla held a significant amount of influence over the school even though they allowed the administrative duties over the school to shift to the board of missions. Further evidence of how Chahta okla remained deeply invested in the success of the school lies in the records of the Choctaw Council. Rather than losing influence and control over the school by allowing the mission board to assume administration of the school the Choctaw Nation, it seems, became more aware and engaged with the concerns of the school, by demanding regular progress reports and performing periodic campus checkup visits throughout the year.

Some examples of these records include, November 10 1885. The Choctaw Council passed a bill requiring all future superintendents of Spencer Academy to be approved by the principal chief (Bill No.66, 1885). In 1877 the Council passed a bill requiring a full health examination of students at Spencer Academy (Proposed Act, 1877). Another special committee was appointed by the Choctaw Council for the purpose of inspecting the conditions of Spencer Academy in 1887 (Resolution Authorizing, 1887). A resolution was passed by the Choctaw Council in 1889 that

required a formal complete investigation of the conditions and finances of Spencer Academy (A Proposed Act, 1889). Finally, in 1891, the Choctaw Council passed an act to add \$600 to the general budget for the school (An Act Appropriating, 1891). These are only a few of the many recorded actions taken by the Choctaw government to remain actively involved in the administration of their schools and the wellbeing of Chahta students.

As with the Choctaw Academy, Spencer Academy also incorporated bilingual teaching methods. Ramsey organized the curriculum into English only classes, and “special” classes for those who could not yet speak English (Baird 1965, 15). The design of the curriculum allowed for the more advanced English only students to mentor and tutor the students of the “special” classes until the “special” classes were no longer needed. Staff of the school recollected an environment of older boys mentoring younger boys that likely developed out this dual class system (Greene. b, 1937). Unlike many accounts of other Indian boarding schools, the students at Spencer Academy under Ramsey’s administration were not punished for using their language. It was used alongside English to reinforce academic achievement, which appealed to the traditionalists as well as the progressives on the Choctaw Council. While this curriculum was intended to encourage the English language and eventually remove the Chahta language and all cultural elements that came with it, this curriculum actually created a bilingual program in which Chahta students cultivated the connections to their traditional culture while learning how to participate in another culture.

Where Choctaw Academy lacked a religious emphasis, so to, the religious aspirations of the missionaries who staffed Spencer Academy were disappointed. The

Choctaw Council remained aware of the board of mission's activities at Spencer Academy. In 1871, they entered into an agreement with the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions to re-open Spencer Academy under the board's administration (Agreement, 1871). In 1876, the Choctaw Council emphasized that the Board of missions should operate Spencer Academy according to the specific laws of the Choctaw Nation (Resolution, 1876). The Choctaw Nation made another resolution, reminding the board of missions of this administrative expectation, in 1880 (Proposed Resolution, 1880). Finally, in 1885, The Choctaw Nation formally repealed its contract with the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions (Bill No. 55, 1885). From these documents it becomes evident that Chahta okla remained cautious of Christian conversion efforts among their youth. Eventually breaking their contract with the board altogether, Chahta okla clearly did not have a priority on Christianity within their schools.

After having established a church on the school grounds and required student attendance, Superintendent Ramsey felt that more students should have converted to Christianity under his supervision. However, after several years of religious exposure, few if any students had converted fully to Christianity at Spencer Academy. This lack of religious conversion further emphasizes the uniqueness of the curriculum used at Spencer Academy. The students were focused on learning to speak and understand English on a practical, conversational basis; therefore, religious scripture did not take priority for students in the classroom. More evidence exists of this lack of religious emphasis, from the high turnover rate of the missionaries sent to do conversation work in the classroom by the Board of Foreign Missions. Over a three-year-period, the Board

of Foreign Missions sent several missionaries, none of whom completed their expected three-year contract at the school. Casper Gregory and A. J. Graham left their post after only a year of service. Hamilton Balentine served for only two years, and J.G Turner lasted only thirteen months (Baird 1965, 21). The fact that the school could not keep a steady staff of missionaries speaks to the motivations of the students in attendance at the school. Not interested in Christianity, only English literacy, these students frustrated those who tried to convert them. Coleman interprets conflicts between students and religiously motivated teachers as a manifestation of the Chahta student's resistance towards assimilation. He says,

Mischievousness and lagging behind are typical of schoolchildren, but such responses by Indians were also an expression of group-oriented tribal values; indeed, as historians have noted, they could be forms of resistance. The bitter reactions of older Choctaw boys to discipline, and, especially, the tendency of so many young Indians to flee the schools, were clearly products of cultural confrontation. All such activities, dutifully reported by the missionaries, indicated attempts by pupils to limit the control and manipulation inherent in the BFM program (1987, 483).

Other missionaries have also recorded difficulties in Christian conversions. Robert Burt wrote of one student, "He is not deficient in religious training, [...] but we cannot tell what are the feelings of their hearts. Those are known only to the All-Seeing Eye" (Coleman 1987, 483). Burt reports elsewhere,

[T]hey are so unlike white or other boys, still preserving that power or control over any expression of their feelings that belonged to their forefathers, to render it impossible to say that they really possessed such feeling (Coleman 1987, 483)."

According to reports like these, Chahta students at Spencer Academy frustrated their missionary teachers by holding on to traditional beliefs and behaviors of their people while superficially going through the motions of Christianity and western behaviors. In

resisting certain aspects of the school, Chahta students were manipulating Spencer Academy into a hybrid institute of western education and Chahta traditional values.

After three years at the school, Ramsey reported that none of the students had improved their English, only fourteen boys had converted to Christianity, and the budget remained insufficient and unable to avoid the accumulation of debt (Baird 1965, 17). I contend that the debt accrued under Ramsey's administration can be attributed to the building of a church and a fourth dormitory on the school's campus that might have been unnecessary construction, as there are few records indicating a significant increase in student population or a request by the Choctaw Nation, who was fronting the majority of the school's debt, for a church. As for the lack of Christian converts, from a Chahta perspective, this was an irrelevant factor as their youth were not sent to the school to learn Christianity; they were sent to learn the English language and how to manipulate the western culture to benefit the needs of Chahta okla. Finally, this supposedly lack of English improvement is likely a frustration of the students continued use of the Chahta language alongside English rather than a lack of learning all together.

Ramsey's and other recorded missionaries' frustrations with the school largely stemmed from the American desire to completely assimilate Native peoples. Since the school did not completely remove Chahta peoplehood (language, sense of place, spirituality and knowledge of history) it was a failure from the board of missions and the federal government's perspective. James Taylor Carson explains the relationship between Christianity and Chahta okla saying,

[They] neither converted to nor rejected Christianity wholesale. Rather, they fashioned a syncretic faith that reflected their cultural and intellectual juxtaposition of ancient precedents and more recent innovations (Cars1999, 105).

The inconsistent participation in Christian activities recorded by missionaries at both Choctaw Academy and Spencer Academy speak to this intellectual juxtaposition of Chahta okla. The unique relationship between Chahta okla and Christianity is a complex one that requires further research in future studies to fully unpack. For this study it is sufficient to say that the Christian religion, at least at Choctaw Academy and Spencer Academy, seems to have played a less-than-major influencing factor in Choctaw education.

Choctaw Academy created Chahta okla who could defend themselves against corrupt land deals. Spencer Academy was similarly successful. Chief Mushulatubbe wrote in 1822, “I hope I shall yet live to see my council filled with boys who are now in school and that you will know much more than we know, and do much better than we do” (Carson 1999, 86). Graduates of Spencer Academy became the beginning of a Choctaw generation; i.e. Chahta individuals who were fluent enough in western culture to lead their people into a future of political autonomy. This new Choctaw generation would be the ones to begin building a more positive relationship with the United States government and encourage a stronger connection with their new environment.

Alexander Reid (non-Native) took over as the third superintendent of Spencer Academy in 1849. Similarly to Ramsey, Reid was a product of western education and Christian doctrine. Reid immediately set in motion the creation of unified and freshly motivated school staff and actively engaged in dialogue with the Choctaw Council and Board of Trustees. Facing being shut down due to a long series of misfortunes and conflicts, Reid had to convince his staff, his students, and the Board of Trustees that the school was worth preserving. The number one way he set out to achieve this goal was

to address the high turnover rate of missionary teachers at the schools. Reid claimed, “You can’t find competent ministers to teach. They don’t have the grace” (Baird 1965, 24). From Reid’s point of view, the school needed more educationally focused staff rather than more religiously focused staff, which was the focus under Ramsey. According to Baird, Reid had a discriminatory bias towards female missionaries and teachers at the school. According to the missionary accounts compiled by Coleman, the female teachers formed the closest bonds with the students, which led to a higher retention rate for Chahta students. I interpreted this positive connection with female teachers over male teachers as the presence of Chahta peoplehood in the school. At home these students would have recognized their female community members as the authority of general knowledge and wisdom. It would be only natural for them to seek out that same kind of knowledge-nurturing relationship at their school with their female instructors. Furthermore, the recorded accounts of interactions between male teachers and Chahta students were generally negative and resulted in physical confrontation (Coleman 1987, 485). Eventually Reid set aside his gender bias and encouraged female teachers to form these positive bonds described by Coleman.

Scholars have generally considered Reid’s administration successful. By significantly reducing the number of staff and the salaries of all the staff including himself, Reid came the closest of all the school’s superintendent’s to balancing the budget. Also, by maintaining good relationships with the Choctaw Nation and Chahta communities, the enrollment rate of Chahta boys was at its highest under Reid’s administration, reaching over 100 students (Baird 1965, 26). For Reid, the main disappointment of the Spencer Academy was the low retention rate of older and more

advanced Chahta students. The majority of students who had reached a proficient level of the English language and were old enough to take care of themselves soon departed from the school and returned home. This departure was likely due to a perceived need from these students' communities. At an age in which they were physically and mentally capable of taking on their responsibilities as community members, these students were answering their communities' call to return home.

Few first accounts of this kind of social responsibility are available. However those that were available for this study help to highlight the unique experiences of Chahta students at Spencer Academy. Norman J. Leard became private secretary to Choctaw Nation Principal Chief Green McCurtain and later private secretary to Governor Duke (Greene, 1937) and Jimpson Davenport was appointed county clerk for Cedar County after leaving Spencer Academy (Hampton, 1937). Jimpson recalled the schools as "a good school for us Indians" (Hampton, 1937). Another student O. L. Blanche, recalled an intense motivation to continue going to school after Spencer Academy burned down. Blanche says,

I was so eager for education that I left home and left the Choctaw Nation [...] did farm work in exchange for room and board and laundry and walked four miles [...] to town to school" (Greene. c, 1937).

From these Spencer Academy graduates' brief testimonies, it is hard to argue against the positive influence of the school on its Chahta students. Unfortunately, I was unable to find more of these kinds of testimonies in the Western History Collection archives. Future research into personal testimonies like the few I have included in this study would allow for an even stronger exploration into the interesting relationship between Chahta okla and western education. Just from these brief overviews, it is clear that

Spencer Academy and Choctaw Academy were more than just a strategic assimilation tactic by the American government. They were places of change and adaptation and strategic tactics of survival.

Ending the Story

Concluding Thoughts

Choctaw schools created a new image of Indian education. The story of Choctaw education is one of partial acculturation not “total assimilation”. Choctaw Academy and Spencer Academy are just two examples of this unique environment that existed for Chahta and other Native students at Choctaw schools. While the Americans’ desired end result of western education was the eventual integration of Chahta okla into American society, the desired result for Chahta okla from western education was the eventual affirmation of Chahta peoplehood through Choctaw sovereignty.

In any case Study there are always outlying factors. Choctaw education is no different. Not everyone, then nor now, agree on what is the best course of action regarding integrations with western society. Furthermore, the contemporary disconnect from traditional culture such as, forgetting songs and lost ceremonies, point to a serious derailing of Chahta okla from their original path towards protecting their peoplehood while asserting their sovereignty, that this study has revealed. Future research by Chahta scholars should focus on this derailing that seems to have happened. This study reveals this problem but further explorations as to what might have caused this problem and how we can get ourselves back on track is important.

Choctaw Academy and Spencer Academy both operated under a close administrative involvement by the Choctaw government and they used a unique, assimilation-resistant curriculum of bilingual and culturally liberal classrooms. My brief analysis in this study has revealed evidence of Chahta okla being what Garrett and Pichette described as, “marginally acculturated” and “biculturally acculturated”, rather than totally assimilated. Though the United States federal government through their partnership with religious organizations remained persistent in their assimilation efforts, the environments at Choctaw schools like Choctaw Academy and Spencer Academy were just different enough to allow for Chahta culture to remain an active part of students’ identities while they simultaneously practiced living in the western culture. From these two case studies of Choctaw education it seems that Chahta okla never fully assimilated into American society during this political and socially turbulent period in time.

At Choctaw Academy and Spencer Academy, students participated in singing and oration alongside literacy training in both English and Chahta. Through the use of their language and the presence of some of their culture, Chahta students at western schools became “culture brokers” for their people - well versed in both American culture and Chahta culture. Future studies should focus on the many other Choctaw schools from the 1800s to the present, that possess the adaptable hybrid quality of Chahta okla that this study has attempted to point out. Besides bilingual singing and literacy, other students at other schools, brought Chahta elements into sewing, farming, dancing, and various other aspects of western education for Native students. Choctaw schools formed a protective barrier between colonizing America and Chahta

peoplehood. They served as the compasses used by Choctaw leaders to navigate Chahta okla through the foggy waters of western society. The skills available through a western education including literacy, law, and mathematics helped Chahta okla create an important tool for the survival of Chatha peoplehood: Choctaw government.

Many of ancestors predicted the unfortunate political and social situation in which contemporary Chahta okla find themselves. We are constantly fighting to assert ourselves as an independent Nation worthy of a nation-to-nation relationship with the Unites States. Despite the passing of the Citizenship Act by the United States Congress in 1924, Chahta okla did not assimilate into a lower-class of American citizens. *We are* American citizens and many of us carry that title with pride and honor; however, contrary to the popular belief of most Americans, we are also Chahta and never stopped being Chahta.. We remind Americans of our “Chahta-ness” through the operations of our Choctaw government, and its daily assertions of sovereignty. Choctaw schools played an important part in the creation and maintenance of that new form of government and the contemporary political environment of Chahta okla.

This study seeks to remind contemporary Chahta okla of how our ancestors used western education to create and maintain a nation-to-nation relationship with the Unites States and to protect out peoplehood. As Chahta okla attend public schools, which are operated under a curriculum that grooms complacent American citizens; go on to attend western institutes of higher education, which perpetuate western patriarchal social expectations, it is vital to look back at our ancestors and see how they were able to create environments of cultural preservation and persistence within those kinds of institutions.

This study has pointed to a variety of evidence from Choctaw Academy in Kentucky and Spencer Academy in Indian Territory that suggest a unique relationship between western education and Chahta okla. From treaty negotiations to quarterly reports, Chahta okla have remained deeply invested in the future of their youth. Western education was the currency through which Chahta okla established an anglicized form of government that advocated for the protection of Chahta peoplehood. This study has contended that Chahta okla did not fully assimilate into American culture. Through their unique relationship with western education, Chahta okla acculturated into a hybrid existence of both Chahta culture and American culture.

As Donald Birchfield. suggested in the introduction of this study, Chahta okla have always been masters of flexibility and adaptability. Rather than let the American government “fashion” them into submissive working-class Americans, Chahta okla “fashioned themselves into what they wanted to be”: a culturally distinct, politically autonomous Nation of Chahta people (Birchfield 2007, 12). Contemporary Chahta oklah should continue in this tradition of adaptation. As we enter into western institutions of higher education and cultivate “Choctaw excellence,” we must remember to distinguish between that which is Choctaw and that which is Chahta.

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