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“Fully Equal to That of Any Children”: Experimental Creek Education in the Antebellum Era

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Abstract

During the 1840s and 1850s, members of the Creek Nation rejected schools as a colonial tool and instead experimented with various forms of education to fit their own local and national needs. Diverse individuals and communities articulated educational visions for their nation in conversation with fellow citizens, national leaders, and U.S. educators. Rather than embrace education to assimilate into the American republic, Creeks turned to schools and English literacy as one strategy to shape their own society and defend it from further Euro-American colonial policies. By the end of the 1850s, they had established a fledgling national school system consisting of both neighborhood and mission schools. These institutions reflected and reinforced changes in race, class, gender, culture, and religion in the antebellum Creek Nation.

In the 1840s, a surprising education advocate, Opothleyohola, addressed the need for schools in the Creek Nation.¹ Notoriously opposed to

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¹During the colonial period, the Creeks organized their world into a system of autonomous towns with distinct cultural and economic characteristics. Geographic location and clan affiliation divided the towns into Upper Town and Lower Town divisions held together in a flexible coalition. During removal, factionalism divided the Upper and Lower towns, but following removal Creeks increasingly centralized into a nation rather than a confederacy. For a colonial political history of the Creeks, see Steven C. Hahn, *The Invention of the Creek Nation, 1670–1763* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014); and for a history of removal in the early nineteenth century, see Michael D. Green, *The Politics of Indian Removal: Creek Government and Society in Crisis* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985).

Christian influence and white encroachment, Opothleyohola had served as a prominent leader for decades. He declared to the Creek Council, "I have always been opposed to the white man's religion, but I am not opposed to education. We must educate our children and instill in them a love of their race so that they may stand between us and trouble." This message struck a chord among leaders who actively wanted to expand educational opportunities, as well as those more culturally conservative members who nonetheless increasingly recognized the potential benefits of English literacy.²

Rather than a means of assimilating into Euro-American society, Opothleyohola conceived education as a tool to bind the Creek people together and to help them protect their sovereignty. He even sent his son to the Choctaw Academy in Kentucky to master English literacy.³ Like common school reformers in the United States, Opothleyohola encouraged education in response to the economic, social, and political shifts in his own nation. Foremost among these changes was the Creeks' forced relocation to Indian Territory in the 1830s. Now, while rebuilding in Indian Territory, Opothleyohola noted the need for schools more than ever as a defense mechanism.⁴ He also recognized the success of public school systems already established by the Cherokee and Choctaw Nations.⁵

²Opothleyohola from W. B. Morrison, "Father Murrow" in *My Oklahoma*, n.d., file 1, box 1, Opothleyohola Collection, Native American Manuscripts, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma (hereafter WHC). The typescript is undated, but Murrow attended Creek Councils in the late 1840s when Opothleyohola began publicly advocating education after the resettlement in Indian Territory. Also see Mary Jane Warde, *George Washington Grayson and the Creek Nation, 1843–1920* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 41.

³In 1825, the Choctaws negotiated a treaty with the federal government in which leaders agreed to establish Choctaw Academy in Blue Springs, Kentucky. Under pressure from the federal government, state legislatures, and white intruders to cede their land, Choctaws wished to produce a generation of educated leaders as a strategy to protect their sovereignty. An alternative to missionary-led education, the school became the first national school for Native Americans in the United States. Although largely funded by the Choctaw Nation, children from other Southern indigenous groups attended. Carolyn Thomas Foreman, "The Choctaw Academy," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 6, no. 4 (December 1928), 453. Also see Jeff Fortney, "Robert M. Jones and the Choctaw Nation: Indigenous Nationalism in the American South," unpublished dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 2014, 77–83.

⁴Warde, *George Washington Grayson and the Creek Nation*, 41.

⁵For more on early Cherokee education, see Devon A. Mihesuah, *Cultivating the Rosebuds: The Education of Women at the Cherokee Female Seminary, 1851–1909* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); James Parins, *Literacy and Intellectual Life in the Cherokee Nation, 1820–1906* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013); William G. McLoughlin, *Cherokee Renaissance in the New Republic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 350–36. McLoughlin also traces the careers of missionaries Evan and John B. Jones, who served the Cherokees for fifty years, in William G. McLoughlin, *Champions of the Cherokees: Evan and John B. Jones* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990). For a discussion of Choctaw schools and missionaries, see Clara Sue

This essay argues that Creek leaders, citizens, and white missionaries debated and experimented during the 1840s and 1850s to find which education forms would prove the most advantageous to the Creek Nation.⁶ In this period of trial and error, the Creek government and communities worked to shape schools to fit their own local and national needs, world views, and everyday practices. Rather than forfeiting indigenous culture and sovereignty to assimilate into the American republic, Creeks turned to education as one strategy to shape their society and reinforce their identity in the postremoval nation. Schools increasingly became a central component of Creek society during the 1850s, reflecting deep social and political transformations. By the end of the decade, the Creek Council had established an education system—a network of schools funded and managed under its authority. Through this process, Creeks undertook what anthropologist Linda K. Neuman has described as a transformation of “schools for Indians” into “Indian schools by subverting the colonial aims of federal Indian education policy.”⁷ Thus, using the Creek Nation as a case study reveals the complex process of adaptation at work.

Although the Creeks, Cherokees, Choctaws, and Chickasaws developed public school systems in Indian Territory during the antebellum period, historians have largely overlooked these institutions. The majority of scholarship on Indian education focuses on the U.S. federal government’s systematic policies from the 1870s to the 1930s to assimilate Native Americans. Scholars who have contributed to this literature either emphasize education in boarding schools as a tool of assimilation policy or the consequences of the education campaign on tribal cultures. These studies offer insights into federal Indian policy and the persis-

Kidwell, *Choctaws and Missionaries in Mississippi, 1818–1918* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995).

⁶I use the term *Creek* to describe the diverse members of the nineteenth-century Creek Nation, including those with Native, European, and African heritage. Although *Muskogee* is often used interchangeably with *Creek*, historically it applied to one of the language groups that had coalesced into the Creek Nation. Yuchis, for example, belonged to the Creek Nation but maintained their own distinct language. In the twenty-first century, Muskogee (Creek) Nation is the official designation.

⁷For an outline of this process, see Linda K. Neuman, *Indian Play: Indigenous Identities at Bacone College* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 1–28. In this study, Neuman traces the transformation at Bacone College in Muskogee, Oklahoma, arguing, “Students used Bacone as a space for the exploration of their own and others’ Indian identities, as they learned from one another.” It is worth noting that, although Bacone’s founder, Almon C. Bacone, and the Baptist Mission operated the school with assimilationist goals, the Creek government, which gave Bacone permission and a land grant to move the school into the Creek Nation at Muskogee, had a different understanding of the institution. They viewed it as a supplement to their own education system, which began in the period discussed in this article. See “Samuel Checote to the National Council,” October 27, 1881, slide 36083, roll 43, Creek Nation Records, Oklahoma Historical Society (hereafter cited as OHS); Neuman, *Indian Play*, 42.

tence of Native cultures. Yet, their dominance has caused historians to analyze the education of Native peoples primarily within the context of assimilation policy, American nation-building, and the expansion of federal power.⁸ Meanwhile, the public school systems controlled by the indigenous nations in Indian Territory have remained largely absent from Native American education histories.⁹

Likewise, historians of American education typically portray the rise of the common school movement and Native education as antithetical processes in that one was building a nation, the other destroying nations. They have elaborated on Horace Mann's common school movement and its impact on white U.S. citizens as well as the exclusion of African Americans and Native Americans from this system.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the common schools established by sovereign indigenous nations complicate the larger narrative of education for these racial groups during the same period. Studies of antebellum education also often offer regional comparisons between the North and South, but

⁸Several works examine assimilation policy and the federal boarding schools. For example, see Frederick E. Hoxie, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880–1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001); and David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875–1928* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995). A number of case studies examine Indian identity and agency at specific schools. For example see K. Tsiarina Lomawaima, *They Called It Prairie Light The Story of Chilocco Indian School* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994) and Clyde Ellis, *To Change Them Forever: Indian Education at the Rainy Mountain Boarding School, 1893–1920* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996).

⁹In his seminal study on federal boarding school education, historian David Wallace Adams explains that the schools “exempted from this study are those associated with the so-called ‘five civilized tribes,’ a story sufficiently unique as to require a separate investigation.” See Adams, *Education for Extinction*, x. Only two works, Devon Mihesuah's *Cultivating the Rosebuds* and Amanda Cobb-Greetham's *Listening to Our Grandmothers' Stories: The Bloomfield Academy for Chickasaw Females, 1852–1949* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), offer case studies of schools operated by Native governments. These foundational studies offer the closest opportunity for comparison in the historiography. In particular, Cobb-Greetham's assertion that “Because they knew that education was crucial to their economic success and ultimately to their survival, Chickasaws urgently desired to continue the education of their children and made appropriations for a tribal academy” reveals the similar processes and motivations by which the Creeks and Chickasaws adapted schools for their own purposes. These works offer histories of female academies in the Cherokee and Chickasaw Nations, the various forms of literacy that emerged from these institutions, and the effects of education on social relations. My work attempts to broaden the scope of these case studies to examine the experiences of diverse male and female Indians and Afro-Indians residing within the multicultural society of the Creek Nation.

¹⁰For more on the early common school movement, see Carl Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780–1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983) and William J. Reese, *America's Public Schools: From the Common School to “No Child Left Behind”* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2011). For a discussion of race and the common school movement, see Hilary J. Moss, *Schooling Citizens: The Struggle for African American Education in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

the Five Tribes' relocation to Indian Territory provides an opportunity to shift the geographic framework westward.¹¹ For instance, in his seminal work on common school education in America, historian Carl Kaestle asserts that at the beginning of the antebellum period, "America had schools, but except in large cities, America did not have school systems." In both the North and the South at this time, schools in rural areas remained largely locally controlled, often with little or no financial support from state governments or legislative regulation.¹² More systematic state funding and support for rural schools developed in the North from the 1830s through the 1850s. In the early 1840s, prior to the Civil War, Native governments west of the Mississippi also began to finance, legislate, and administer schools on a centralized basis. Thus, the Creek Nation offers a rich starting point for reconsidering the variety of schools in antebellum North America and the ways in which diverse groups shaped and utilized education.

After beginning with a brief overview of Creek history, including the effects of U.S. "civilization" policies and the Indian Removal Act, this article details two phases in the development of Creek schools during the antebellum period. First, it chronicles how the Creek government, beginning in the 1840s, collaborated with missionaries to establish manual labor schools. Second, it examines how, during the 1850s, the Creeks developed an increasingly centralized system of common schools financed and administered under the authority of their government. The essay then closes with a summary of how the Creek Nation built on these early forms of schooling to develop an extensive public school system in the postbellum era.

The Creeks initially inhabited territory in Georgia, Alabama, and Florida. Trade, diplomacy, and slavery in the region led to the influx of diverse Euro-Americans and African Americans into Creek country during the seventeenth century. Frequent intermarriages, matrilineal kinship adoptions, and the embrace of African-American slaveholding resulted in an increasingly multicultural Creek society. Maternal relatives and clan elders typically "instructed, counseled, and protected" young children because of persistent matrilineal and matrilocal practices. Creek children also participated in ceremonial and political life, where they learned familial and social responsibilities, including "clan loyalty, respect to elders, concern for others, and other Creek virtues."¹³ During the early nineteenth century, however, American coloniza-

¹¹Five Tribes, or so-called "Five Civilized Tribes," is commonly used to refer collectively to the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, and Seminole Nations.

¹²Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic*, 62.

¹³Benjamin W. Griffith Jr., *McIntosh and Weatherford, Creek Indian Leaders* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1988), 11–22.

tion efforts triggered social, political, and economic transformations among the southeastern indigenous nations. As a defensive response, the Creeks adapted a more centralized government, private property, commercial agriculture, slaveholding, patriarchy, and racial ideology.

The continued presence of the Creeks, along with neighboring Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Seminoles, created an obstacle to political and culture homogeneity in the expanding American nation-state.¹⁴ Subsequently, the U.S. government attempted to use education as part of the civilization program to solve America's "Indian Problem." In 1819, Congress passed the Civilization Fund Act, which provided \$10,000 annually to benevolent societies for missionaries to establish schools among Native Americans.¹⁵ Unlike the Cherokees, Choctaws, and Chickasaws, who more willingly embraced education, the Creeks violently resisted attempts to educate and convert members of their society. Diverse Creeks feared that the intrusion of Euro-American missionary educators within their territory would hasten attempts to destroy their cultural practices, dispossess them of land, erode their political sovereignty, and incite slave insurrections. Two schools, Asbury Mission, operated by Methodists, and Withington Station, operated by Baptists, opened for a brief period in the 1820s but soon sparked hostility. One particularly violent incident occurred at Withington Station, where a group of Creek men discovered a number of Afro-Creek converts and "led them out one by one fastened them to a post in the yard, where they beat them unmercifully."¹⁶ By the 1830s, the schools had closed and the missionaries had fled the region.

No amount of resistance to civilization policies, however, could negate the colonial framework that created uneven power relations between the Creeks and the United States. From the beginning, the civilization program was a trap designed to undermine Native sovereignty. As land-hungry white Americans flooded into Creek

¹⁴Creek-US relations emerged within a framework of settler colonialism. According to historian Walter L. Hixson, settler colonialism is the ideology in which "Euro-American settlers imagined that it was their destiny to take control of colonial space and nothing and nothing would deter them from carrying out that process. Many came to view the *very existence of Indians* as an impediment to individual and national aspirations." Walter L. Hixson, *American Settler Colonialism: A History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), viii. For a discussion of Native American education and settler colonialism, see Margaret Jacobs, *White Mother to a Dark Race: Settler Colonialism, Maternalism, and the Removal of Indigenous Children in the American West and Australia, 1880–1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011).

¹⁵Herman J. Viola, *Thomas L. McKenney: Architect of America's Early Indian Policy, 1816–1830* (Chicago: Sage Books, 1974).

¹⁶Lee Comprere to Thomas McKenney, May, 20, 1828, Letters Received by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Creek Agency, 1824–1876, slide 703, roll 221, record group 75, National Archives, M234.

territory, they agitated for Indian removal. Consequently, during the 1830s, the Jackson administration forcibly removed the Creeks, Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Seminoles, along with the African-American slaves they owned, to Indian Territory, modern-day eastern Oklahoma.

After resettling, the Cherokee and Choctaw Nations opened several boarding schools cosponsored by their governments and missionary societies as well as dozens of neighborhood schools. In 1841, the Cherokee Council passed the Public Education Act, and within five years twenty-one free public schools were operating in Cherokee communities.¹⁷ During the same period, the Choctaw Council built three male academies, five female academies, and some smaller schools. They “set the example of voluntary contribution by devoting to that object \$18,000 of the annuities paid them distributively.” The Chickasaws followed suit by allocating annuity payments toward national schools, and Creek leaders took considerable notice. Agent William Armstrong reported to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, “The idea of creating schools themselves, in their own country, under their own control and supervision, has had great effect upon the adjoining tribes, inducing some to take steps of like nature.”¹⁸ As such, a growing number of Creeks recognized the successes of nearby Native-controlled institutions.¹⁹

While rebuilding, many Creeks increasingly exhibited a desire to make schools and English literacy a central component of their nationhood. By the second half of the 1840s, leaders focused on establishing manual labor schools similar to Choctaw schools. A treaty negotiated in 1845 among the Creeks, United States, and Seminoles allocated funding for two manual labor institutions within the bounds of the Creek Nation.²⁰ In 1847, the Creek Council negotiated contracts for these schools with Christian benevolent societies in the United States. The Council agreed to allocate educational annuity funds to pay for

¹⁷Parins, *Literacy and Intellectual Life*, 68, 77–78.

¹⁸William Armstrong to William Medill, 20 October 1846, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs 1846-1847* (hereafter cited as ARCIA), 340.

¹⁹Following removal, Creeks and the other members of the Five Tribes” rebuilt their societies based on the recognition of their national sovereignty promised to them in the removal treaties and upheld by the 1832 *Worcester v. Georgia* Supreme Court decision. *Worcester v. Georgia* defined Native nations as “distinct political communities having territorial boundaries, within which their authority is exclusive, and having a right to all the lands within those boundaries, which is not only acknowledged but guaranteed by the United States.” Following this decision, the Five Tribes rejected federal intervention until the 1898 Curtis Act, which legally dissolved them. This decision continues to be the basis for Native legal sovereignty in the US Bureau of Indian Affairs. See Kenneth S. Murchison, ed., *Digest of Decisions Relating to Indian Affairs*, vol. I (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1901), 524.

²⁰William Armstrong to William Medill, ARCIA, 1846, 342.

the general expenses of the school if the missionary boards provided trained teachers. They entered into an agreement with the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions to open a large manual labor school named Tullahassee in the northeastern portion of the Creek Nation, near the plantations of several affluent Creeks. They formed a similar agreement with the Methodists to open the Asbury manual labor school at North Fork town, a growing trade center in the southern portion of the nation located between the Canadian River and its north fork.²¹

The ample funding from the Creek educational annuity allowed for the construction of state-of-the-art facilities. Asbury was a large, three-story, stone building with twenty-one rooms located on a tract of over twenty acres. It was also outfitted with livestock and farm supplies.²² Construction commenced on the second school, Tullahassee, in 1848. A visitor described it as “a substantial brick building of three stories high with a modest cupola, in which is a small bell.” The school grounds included an “orchard, workshop, tool-room, and stables,” as well as the farm acreage, chapel, and cemetery.²³ The new schools each accommodated forty male and forty female students, varying in age from six to eighteen. Two previously constructed schools also continued to operate with permission from the Creek Council. These included Coweta, a small Presbyterian institution that housed up to fifty students, and a Baptist mission school that boarded approximately thirty students.²⁴ More Creek children than ever before, both male and female, now had access to formal education.

Though it is tempting to liken Creek manual labor schools to the federal boarding schools of the late nineteenth century, they differed profoundly in their objectives and administration.²⁵ Their position in Creek territory, rather than off-reservation, forced white missionaries to forge political and social connections in communities to create

²¹Robert M. Loughridge, “History of Mission Work Among the Creek Indians from 1832 to 1888 Under the Direction of the Board of Foreign Missions Presbyterian Church in the U.S.,” folder 1, Robert M. Loughridge Collection, OHS; Angie Debo, *The Road to Disappearance: A History of the Creek Indians* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979), 120–121; and Virginia E. Lauderdale, “Tullahassee Mission,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 26 no. 3 (Fall 1948), 285–300.

²²Thos. B. Ruble to Colonel Raiford, Agent of the Creeks, Oct. 8, 1849, ARCIA, 1849, 1124.

²³A. W. Loomis, *Scenes in the Indian Country* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1859), 39–40.

²⁴Debo, *The Road to Disappearance*, 120–21.

²⁵Several scholars chronicle assimilation policies and student experiences in federal boarding schools during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Adams provides the most extensive synthesis on the topic. Employing a framework of colonialism, he asserts agents of assimilation believed that the “last great Indian war should be waged against the children.” He argues assimilationists sought “the eradication of all traces of tribal identity and culture” and to replace them with the “values of white civilization” through boarding school education. See Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 335–36.

change from within society. The proximity to their homes also assisted students in maintaining connections with their language, kinship groups, and cultural practices. While teachers and superintendents had similar clear-cut goals of “civilizing” their students, they did not typically employ the harsh “kill the Indian, save the man” approach later adopted in federal boarding schools. Reverend Hamilton Balentine, who served as superintendent at the Coweta school, explained to U.S. officials: “In the teaching of these children we have constantly had in view a threefold object, viz: first, the development of their moral and religious powers; secondly, the expansion and cultivation of their intellectual capacities; and, thirdly, the application of their physical powers to purposes of utility.”²⁶

Even though missionaries intended each of these three objectives to “civilize” their students, the Creek Council supported this curriculum. In fact, Council members provided active consent and financial support for Creek children to receive an English education that would afford them the intellectual, social, and economic advantages necessary to compete with Euro-Americans. Thus, the students’ experiences at the school reflect broader changes in postremoval Creek society, including an emphasis on the power of English literacy, increasing Christian conversion, shifting gender roles, and racial hierarchy.

Daily activities at the schools highlighted these changes. At dawn, the mission bell rang and pupils would rise and tidy their rooms. Male students tended to the outdoor morning chores while female students prepared breakfast, milked the cows, and then spent any spare time sewing and knitting. After breakfast, the missionaries and pupils spent time in “family worship, consisting of reading the scriptures, singing, and prayer.” Beginning at nine o’clock students attended class for three hours. At noon, they gathered for their midday meal and recreation. Classes commenced from one to four o’clock, during which the children studied their texts and performed recitations. After evening chores and supper, children and teachers recited scripture verses together until around eight o’clock, when everyone retired to bed.²⁷

These routines reinforced Euro-American gender roles and the increasing acceptance of them among some sectors of Creek society. In her study of the Cherokee Female Seminary, historian Devon Mihesuah argues that in attempts to mold Cherokee society after white society,

²⁶A. Balentine, Superintendent of Koweta School, to Colonel Raiford, Oct. 3, 1849, ARCIA, 1849, 1126.

²⁷R. M. Loughridge to Colonel Raiford, 28 August 1851, roll 16, no. 75, Presbyterian Historical Society (hereafter cited as PHS); See also the Order of Examination Subjects, 1853, folder 9, box 8, series 1, Alice Mary Robertson Collection, Special Collections, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa (hereafter cited as AMR).

Cherokee leaders desired that “educated females would become pious homemakers and companions to their prominent husbands, whose self-esteem was undoubtedly elevated by placing women in a position that seemed exalted yet subservient.” In this period, Creek leaders also increasingly adopted a patriarchal system that “recognized males as the leaders of the social order.”²⁸ Although the Creeks did not have the resources to establish separate male and female academies such as the Cherokee Nation, education within the new manual labor schools was shaped by Creek adaptations of Euro-American gender ideology as well as the attitudes of the white missionaries who led the schools. Male students regularly attended the manual labor schools during the fall and winter, “but when spring set in many of the boys were called off to aid their parents for a season about their farms and cattle.” Whereas female Creeks had traditionally performed agricultural labor, by the mid-nineteenth century “the girls department remained full” as young Creek males were expected to labor for family agricultural production.²⁹ Thus, Creek boys were trained to become industrious citizens and political leaders, while Creek girls were trained to become nurturing wives and mothers to the men of the Creek Nation.

Labor curriculum served as the primary means reinforcing these shifting gender roles. Teachers emphasized this work as a contribution to the mission family, underscoring that domestic tasks and agricultural production were important to well-functioning households. As historian Rebecca McNulty-Schreiber argues, missionaries in the Creek Nation introduced a strong focus on the Christian family and domesticity as part of the structure of the manual labor school model.³⁰ These schools differed from later forms of exploitative labor designed to train Native peoples as a marginalized work force in a dominant white society. The emphasis on gentle Christian learning played a strong role in mitigating such coercive labor requirements.

Euro-American gender ideology played a vital role in the construction of the mission family. This ideology was rooted in Christian beliefs in family hierarchy, which placed males as the head of house-

²⁸Mihesuah, *Cultivating the Rosebuds*, 21.

²⁹R. M. Loughridge to Colonel W. H. Garrett, U.S. agent to the Creek nation, 13 September 1859, ARCA 1859, 548.

³⁰Rebecca McNulty Schreiber argues that the Creek schools differed from previous Hawaiian manual labor schools in the early nineteenth century. She explains, “Whereas Hawaiian missionaries tended to emphasize political, legal, and land tenure reform as the best way to create a producer society, the Robertsons (and Loughridge, to a certain extent) tended to favor a more domestic approach. They envisioned the manual labor boarding school as a true replacement family.” See Rebecca McNulty Schreiber, “Education for Empire: Manual Labor, Civilization, and the Family in Nineteenth-Century American Missionary Education” (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2007), 112.

hold. The early nineteenth-century ideology of “Republican Motherhood,” in which “righteous mothers were asked to raise the virtuous male citizens on whom the health of the Republic depended” also influenced gender roles at the missions.³¹ At the missions, female teachers were expected to serve as nurturing mother figures for their students. William Robertson, the teacher at Tullahassee, wrote that female teachers “should feel and show an interest in their comfort and happiness out of school by mingling with & watching over them in their leisure hours—should be at once teacher friend sister mother.”³² Likewise, male missionaries served the role of the Christian patriarch. One visitor to Coweta observed the teacher “will be remembered by these boys as long as they live; by many he will be loved, something, perhaps, as you remember a parent.”³³ Missionary societies preferred married couples to head the schools or encouraged single missionaries to find a spouse upon their arrival. For instance, soon after William Robertson arrived to teach at Tullahassee, he married Eliza Ann Worcester, the daughter of longtime Cherokee missionary Samuel Worcester. This reinforced the mission family as the model for teaching indigenous students Euro-American gender norms and family structure based on patriarchy.³⁴

Students’ own understandings of gendered behavior shaped their interactions with others at the mission schools. For instance, as a teenager, George Washington Grayson (Wash) found that although he was “not allowed to meet and talk with the girls of the school” he suspected that one of the white teachers’ daughters, Miss Eva Munson, had developed a crush on him. She confirmed his suspicions when Wash and his younger brother Sam prepared to depart for school break. Fearing she would never see him again, the girl “broke down and cried, causing something of a scene among the school girls” to the young man’s “infinite embarrassment and confusion.” Wash wrote, “This seemed remarkably strange in a young girl to me as to the other pupils of the school, as we knew that an Indian maiden would calmly bear to

³¹Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 10.

³²William Schenk Robertson to Walter Lowrie, 12 November 1851, quoted in Schreiber, “Education for Empire,” 112.

³³Loomis, *Scenes in the Indian Country*, 69.

³⁴Althea Bass, *The Story of Tullahassee* (Oklahoma City: Semco Color Press, 1960), 35–49; Cathleen Cahill details how late nineteenth- and twentieth-century schools under the direction of the Bureau of Indian Affairs replicated the emphasis on married couples. Instead of modeling the Christian family, however, she argues these couples represent the larger project of “intimate colonialism” because they served “symbolically as federal fathers and mothers to their wards.” See Cathleen Cahill, *Federal Fathers and Mothers: A Social History of the United States Indian Service, 1869–1933* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 83.

have an arm cut off rather than betray such emotions in public because of her attachment to a person of the opposite sex.”³⁵ As this scene illustrates, despite missionaries’ attempts to inculcate students with Euro-American gender ideology, students did not easily relinquish their own ideas about appropriate gendered behavior.

In addition to a focus on the family and female virtue, the moral education of Creek children at the missions included Christian worship during set times of the days. Family influence and peers at school often shaped students’ reactions to their Christian instruction. For instance, two eleven-year-old cousins at Coweta were “well behaved” but showed little interest in converting because their “friends were opposed to Christianity.”³⁶ For those who did convert at the schools, they negotiated their own understanding of Christianity and Creek spiritual beliefs. This was the case in 1850 with Charles Barnett, Coweta’s “most advanced student.” His teacher, James Ross Ramsey, found him to be “very moral in his character,” despite the fact that he had not converted to Christianity. Barnett quickly became adept at reading and writing English and served as the interpreter at the school and at church services.³⁷ It was Barnett’s intellectual abilities, not missionary coercion, that eventually led him to adopt Christianity. After reading the widely influential Christian tract *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* by Philip Doddridge, an eighteenth-century British reformer and educator, Barnett embraced Presbyterianism. This remarkable scholar’s life came to an early close, however, when he fell ill with “pulmonary affection.” On his deathbed, he asked his fellow students to join him and told them that they “should love Jesus Christ and prepare to meet him in Heaven.”³⁸

Peers proved influential in shaping the religious beliefs and behaviors of other students. Since Barnett’s fellow pupils admired and respected him, his deathbed plea sparked “a revival of religion.” Prior to this, some of the students had run away from the school and, like Barnett, had shown a reluctance to embrace Christianity. Encouraged, Ramsay found many of his students more dedicated to moral and scholastic improvement after the incident. One of the girls, Kisia

³⁵George W. Grayson, *A Creek Warrior for the Confederacy: The Autobiography of Chief G. W. Grayson*, ed. W. David Baird (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 43. For an extensive biography of Grayson, see Mary Jane Warde, *George Washington Grayson and the Creek Nation, 1843–1920* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999). For details about the history of the Grayson family, see Claudio Saunt, *Black, White, and Indian: Race and the Unmaking of an American Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

³⁶List of Kowetah Students, roll 16, no. 150, PHS.

³⁷James Ross Ramsay Autobiography, folder 1, box 1, James Ross Ramsay Collection, Seminole Nation Papers, Native American Manuscripts, WHC, 23–24.

³⁸Ibid, 24.

Anderson, had previously been so “extremely dull in study” that the teachers “thought of advising her father to take her out of the school.” During the revival, however, as one of the “subjects of grace,” Anderson “became one of the brightest” pupils.³⁹ Charles Barnett forged his own path to Christian conversion and, through his influence, encouraged his peers to succeed at the school following his death. His experience demonstrates students came to embrace Christianity and education on their own terms.

Although Christian worship and chores shaped a portion of daily routine, students spent the majority of their time in rigorous academic study. At Tullahassee, the students studied “spelling, reading, writing, mental and practical arithmetic” using standard American common school textbooks, including McGuffey’s Readers. The more advanced students studied “algebra, geometry, English grammar, natural philosophy, composition, and declamation” as well as history, music, geography, and, later, Latin and Greek.⁴⁰ Coweta and Asbury used similar curriculum and pedagogical materials. These advanced studies mirrored those of students in academies and secondary schools in the United States, as well as the newly established Cherokee Male and Female seminaries.⁴¹

The pupils at these schools, including those fluent in English, often found the heavy workload and expectations of their teachers to be demanding. Nevertheless, many excelled in their studies. For instance, while studying “Geography & the Third reader & Arithmetic 2nd part—penmanship and compositions,” Creek youth William McIntosh informed his kin “I am very glad to say that we will have Vacation in about two weeks from this time . . . Rev W Balentine is teaching this term he make us Study pretty hard I can tell you he does.”⁴² Similarly, Wash Grayson recalled as he “struggled through long division to the unraveling of the mysteries of binomial theorem, the digging out of Latin roots and kindred work.” He described himself as a “slow plodding learner at best” who kept up with his classes only by close and unremitting work.⁴³ Because of his diligence, Wash, along with his brother Sam, became among the most advanced students at Asbury. The intellectual capacity of Creek students often surprised their Euro-American teachers, who commonly associated “Indianness” with ignorance and savagery. In one case, the Coweta superintendent reported to the Creek agent that his students’ academic progress was

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Bass, *The Story of Tullahassee*, 53.

⁴¹Mihesuah, *Cultivating the Rosebuds*, 34–35.

⁴²William McIntosh (cousin) to Henry Shaw, 1850, folder 10, box 5, series 2, AMR.

⁴³Grayson, *Creek Warrior for the Confederacy*, 43–44.

“bordering on the extraordinary.” In fact, he found them to have a high aptitude for learning and noted their progress to be “fully equal to that of any school with which I have been acquainted in the States.”⁴⁴

The heavy focus on English literacy did not negate the use of the Muskogee language. Teachers found that many of the students refused to give up their native tongue. As Superintendent Robert Loughridge observed, “Those who did not understand the English language, and would not try to learn it made but little progress.”⁴⁵ Even those who did learn English continued to speak Muskogee at school and at home during school breaks. Presbyterian missionary David Eakins, a vocal critic of the manual labor schools, noted, “We have known of cases in which the children of half-breeds, who were unacquainted with the Indian language, acquiring a respectable knowledge of it by being thrown in these large places where it was in constant use.”⁴⁶ For him, this trend represented a failure in civilization policy. What Eakins observed, however, was an indigenization of schools as spaces where students incorporated western knowledge systems into their existing world views and practices.

The expansion of Creek education in 1850s also coincided with the early transition of Muskogee from an oral to a written language. Missionaries William and Ann Eliza Robertson worked with Creek interpreters to acquire the language themselves and produced pedagogical materials in the Muskogee language to aid them. They were skilled linguists who went to work translating a number of texts into Muskogee, including scripture, hymns, and a number of classic Greek and Latin texts. Ann Eliza, in particular, grew up speaking Cherokee and English and trained in Greek and Latin at St. Johnsbury Academy in Vermont. Her work with the Muskogee language eventually earned her an honorary doctorate from University of Wooster. Even with her renowned linguistic skills, however, Ann Eliza and her husband relied heavily on the assistance of advanced students and interpreters.⁴⁷

A Creek preacher and scholar named David Winslett proved a powerful ally in the Robertsons’s endeavors. In 1845, Robert Loughridge hired sixteen-year-old Winslett as a laborer at the Coweta School. The superintendent taught him to read and allowed him to work by day and study at night. Loughridge invited him to enroll as a student at Coweta, and then Winslett transferred to Tallahassee after it opened.

⁴⁴A. Balentine, Superintendent of Kowetah School to Colonel Raiford, 3 October 1849, ARCIA, 1849, 1126.

⁴⁵Loughridge, “History of Mission Work,” folder 1, Robert M. Loughridge Collection, OHS, 30.

⁴⁶David W. Eakins to Colonel Raiford, 25 October 1849, ARCIA, 1849, 1120.

⁴⁷Hope Holway, “Ann Eliza Worcester Robertson as a Linguist,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 37 (Spring 1959), 35–44.

Winslett devoted his time to “the education and Christianization of his people,” serving as an interpreter and then studying the ministry under the direction of the Creek Presbytery. During the 1850s, he assisted Loughridge and the Robertsons in their language studies. Together, he and William Robertson translated McGuffey’s *Eclectic First Reader* and published the volume as *Nakcokv es Keretv Enhvtecesk* (Creek First Reader) in 1856. While the missionaries lauded Winslett for his “noble Christian character,” fellow Creeks also prized his preaching and intellectual prowess. In particular, “His services in the translation of the Scriptures and in aiding and preparing hymns and other books in the Creek language was of immense value to the cause of Christ in the nation.”⁴⁸ Winslett’s life came to a tragic and early end in 1861, but he played a direct role in the translation of texts, planting the earliest seeds of Muskogee literacy.

As designed by the members of the Creek Council, locating the manual labor schools within the bounds of their nation allowed students to attend western-style schools without becoming estranged from their society. Some students found an easy balance fitting school within the broader rhythms of Creek life. During the summer months, Creeks produced crops, held ceremonies, and carried out ball games between towns. At the beginning of each summer, students would travel home to rejoin their towns and lend their labor to their families’ production. Thus, during the summer months, many manual labor school students continued to experience the traditional forms of Creek education and socialization. The English education, Christianity, and Euro-American gender norms they learned at the schools provided them with a decidedly different childhood experience during the 1850s than Creek children who did not attend schools. Nevertheless, these experiences did not interfere with their preexisting connections to kinship groups, towns, and cultural practices. Some students blended these varying forms of education, which enabled the diverse exposure to traditional Creek education and the new forms of Creek education to shape their world views and early life experiences.⁴⁹

Conversely, those who had little prerequisite knowledge of English or acculturative practices did not cope well at the schools. Their more traditional forms of Creek education—laboring with families, instruction from clan elders, and Creek ceremonial life—ill prepared them for the boarding schools. As one contemporary observer noted, “Untutored Indian students are not to be reconciled at once to the dull routine of the school, and the stately uniformity of a well-ordered household:

⁴⁸Loughridge, “History of Mission Work,” 19–20.

⁴⁹For example, see Charles Barnett, *Autobiography of a Creek Student*, folder 6, box 1, series 2, AMR.

it is a great change from the free and indolent life to which they had been accustomed."⁵⁰ Others found their studies too different from traditional education. Some ran away, but their parents sent them back to school the following term. A few changed their minds on their own and returned to school for a second chance. For instance, several students ran away from Tullahassee during its first term. The following year, several of the "runaways desirous of getting back again," gathered at the school in hopes of reclaiming their spots.⁵¹

Illness posed another serious challenge for the manual labor schools and contributed to irregular attendance. Teachers and students alike fell victim to waves of seasonal illness and widespread outbreaks of measles, dysentery, whooping cough, and other infectious diseases. Close quarters and a lack of medical supplies and effective treatments allowed diseases to spread rapidly. When word of sickness at the schools reached Creek neighborhoods, parents would come to the schools and "insist upon taking them home to be doctored" with healing practices. Fourteen-year-old Simon Kully's father retrieved him after he caught pneumonia at Tullahassee during the winter of 1850. The superintendent pled with the man to leave Simon, but despite all his "entreaties and advice he persisted in taking him away homewards, ten miles on horseback." The boy died on the journey. Loughridge attributed the father's actions to the "evil of this superstitious dependence on the arts of conjurors." He found that many of the students' parents had such confidence in their healers "that they are not satisfied with any other treatments."⁵² Of course, Simon Kully's father and other parents likely recognized that the missionaries' treatments did not always prevent the deaths of students either. Concern for the health and safety of their children proved a powerful motivation for parents exercising their power to remove them from schools.

Creek families further played an active role in their children's educational experiences. Students whose parents did not wish them to enroll in the schools did not, and neither teachers nor federal officials had the authority to force them to attend. Some parents decided to remove their children from the schools when they complained about the food, workload, or other conditions. To the frustration of the missionaries, many parents who did wish for their children to attend the schools refused to comply with the set schedule. During certain seasons, families relied on their children's labor for subsistence and production of cash crops and livestock. Thus, children would leave the school for

⁵⁰Loomis, *Scenes in the Indian Country*, 70.

⁵¹W. S. Robertson to Walter Lowrie, Secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions, 3 October 1851, no. 85, roll 16, PHS.

⁵²Loughridge, "History of Mission Work," 27.

long periods and then rejoin their classmates once they had fulfilled their familial obligations. Still other parents prioritized education and ensured their children remained in school despite complaints. At Asbury, Wash Grayson and his brother Sam watched as some of their peers “prevailed upon them [their parents] to take them away from school.” They understood, however, that their “parents would refuse to permit any such representations or acts to influence them to interfere with the continuity of our attendance at school.”⁵³ These patterns illustrate ways in which Creek citizens molded western-style education and the experimental manual labor schools to fit their own needs.⁵⁴

These institutions began to reflect social patterns in the Creek Nation that would persist throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century. As leaders embraced Euro-American ideologies of black inferiority and patriarchy, social divisions intensified along lines of race and socioeconomic class. The interactions of the white teachers, Creek students, and African Americans at the schools serve as a microcosm for the broader relations of power in the Creek Nation during the 1850s. Moreover, they also overlapped with educational trends in the antebellum United States.

Although gender did not exclude children from schools, opportunities for many young Creeks were limited by class, race, and kinship relations. The agreements between the Creek Council and the benevolent societies dictated that a board of trustees would select the students to attend Tullahassee and Asbury each term. The trustees, often missionaries and Creek men of influence, felt under great pressure to select members of affluent and politically powerful families.⁵⁵ Walter Lowrie, Secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions, lamented the situation. He explained, “It is a difficult matter for the trustees to make these selections without giving offence to the Indian families.”⁵⁶ In addition, after years of struggling with non-English-speaking students who had trouble adjusting, the missionaries further empowered these schools to favor acculturated families. They enacted a rule “requiring the children, as far as possible, to speak the English language upon entry.”⁵⁷ Thus, the schools largely privileged the progeny of the most politically powerful and economically affluent families.

⁵³ Grayson, *A Creek Warrior for the Confederacy*, 42.

⁵⁴ R. M. Loughridge to Colonel W. H. Garrett, 13 September, 1859, ARCIA 1859, 548.

⁵⁵ W. S. Robertson to Walter Lowrie, 3 October 1851, no. 85, roll 16, PHS.

⁵⁶ Walter Lowrie to Luke Lea, Esq., 30 September 1850, Letters Received by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, school files, roll 785, slide 339, record group 75, National Archives, M234.

⁵⁷ Loughridge, “History of Mission Work,” 30.

Although historian Angie Debo asserts, "In general . . . it was only the mixed bloods that attended the school," this type of generalization is misleading.⁵⁸ In her study of Cherokee kinship practices, Rose Stremmlau suggests, "When used without explanation, the terms 'full-blood' and 'mixed-blood' are racist distractions," a binary imposed on the Five Tribes from the "colonizers' perspective." Like nineteenth-century Cherokees, Creeks often used these terms to "indicate cultural orientation and upbringing," but few people ever fit into a simple "either or" binary.⁵⁹ Kinship connections, rather than racial makeup, typically determined the privileged minority of children chosen to attend the institutions. Because their subsequent education provided students with more social, economic, and political opportunities within the Creek Nation, the schools further served to reinforce the socioeconomic hierarchy.

The composition of the boarding schools during their early years of operation reflect a more complicated representation of Creek youths than an assemblage of "mixed-blood" scions. Although missionaries encouraged students to speak English, practice Christianity, and behave like white children, the lack of white blood did not preclude students from attending. For instance, during its early years, Tullahassee admitted eighty pupils, "many of them 'half breeds,'" but still maintained a majority of "full Indians speaking not English."⁶⁰ Likewise, at Asbury, Wash Grayson found himself in the minority, remarking, "As the Indians are never red haired or blondes, I was an exception, being also quite white in complexion, and always regretted being as I was—white and red headed."⁶¹ Moreover, a century or more of intermixing among Creeks, African Americans, and Euro-Americans had blurred racial identities among students.

In 1851, for instance, the student body at Coweta was comprised of thirty-five students with diverse racial backgrounds. According to a detailed student list written by the superintendent, ten of the pupils had varying degrees of Creek, African, and Euro-American ancestry. Nine of the students were described as "full Indian," "perhaps full Indian," or "nearly full Indian." He identified four others as Indian "with maybe a little white blood." Eleven others were "part white" and "part Indian" to varying degrees. Only one of the students was fully white, but she was a Creek citizen. The list clearly shows how complex identity had become in the Creek Nation by the mid-nineteenth century.⁶²

⁵⁸Debo, *The Road to Disappearance*, 120.

⁵⁹Rose Stremmlau, *Sustaining the Cherokee Family: Kinship and the Allotment of an Indigenous Nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 13–14.

⁶⁰Bass, *The Story of Tullahassee*, 52.

⁶¹Grayson, *A Creek Warrior for the Confederacy*, 45.

⁶²List of Kowetah Students, roll 16, no. 150, PHS.

Even at the time, Euro-American observers and Creeks could not easily categorize people as “mixed bloods” and “full bloods” based on phenotypes, cultural orientations, or family histories.

Despite evidence of fluid identities during the 1850s, racial distinctions became more rigid during the decade. While the United States stood on the brink of sectional conflict, southern states passed increasingly restrictive slave codes in order to preserve the oppressive racial hierarchy and prevent slave insurrection. The Five Tribes, with their growing population of slaves and free blacks, were not insulated from the escalating tension. In the Creek Nation, wealthy slaveholders, who depended on the exploitation of slave labor, wielded considerable political power. They worked to pass restrictions on the rights and opportunities of slaves and free blacks. The Council excluded anyone who was more than half-African, even if born to a Creek mother, meaning they no longer received annuity payments or had access to Creek institutions, including schools. It also prohibited any abolitionists from serving as teachers in the schools.⁶³

The tightening slave codes and restrictions on free blacks during the 1850s coincided with “growing hostility to black Indian education” in which there was a “concerted effort on the part of Creek slaveholders to root out Afro-Indian children from the sectarian schools in the nation.”⁶⁴ This included the diverse class at the Coweta School. During the early 1850s, the Coweta School continued to operate under the agreement Robert Loughridge had forged with the Creek Council in the 1840s in which the school received money from Creek annuities. Although the Tullahassee and Asbury schools operated under the more recent contracts that stipulated trustees made student selections, the missionary teachers at Coweta admitted students. In April 1851, however, the Creek agent, Colonel Raiford, refused to sign the quarterly report of Coweta’s Superintendent H. Templeton, at the bidding of the Creek Council. This action prevented the school from receiving funding from Creek annuities. The reason for this sudden withdrawal of support stemmed from the objections of some Creeks that “some children who are one fourth African have been admitted by the missionaries.” They would not agree “to have their money appropriated to such schools.”⁶⁵

The Presbyterian missionaries, Colonel Raiford, and the Creek leaders used racial discourse to debate whether certain Creeks with African heritage should be granted the privilege of attending the school.

⁶³Gary Zellar, *African Creeks: Estelwste and the Creek Nation* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 39–40.

⁶⁴Saunt, *Black, White, and Indian*, 78.

⁶⁵J. Ross Ramsey to Walter Lowrie, Nov. 13, 1851, no. 98, roll 16, PHS.

When Raiford accused the missionaries of admitting “half negroes” at Coweta, the missionaries replied that they had “none of that kind.” They, however, did have five students who were “one fourth part African blood.” In a plea to Luke Lea, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Templeton argued that these five children were “citizens of the Creek Nation” and asked, “Would it be right to exclude a portion of its citizens from the privileges of the school?”⁶⁶ The Creek leaders drafted a statement to Lea in which they “unhesitatingly and unanimously” agreed that Colonel Raiford “was acting in accordance with the wishes of the nation.” They informed the commissioner that their contract with the Presbyterians to open Tullahassee voided the previous agreement for Coweta and that the school should no longer receive support from their national funds.⁶⁷ This move centralized the power to determine who attended schools and who did not in the hands of Creek trustees.

Creek antagonism to Afro-Creek schooling coincided with white opposition to black schooling in both the North and the South during the antebellum period. Horace Mann’s common school movement “did little to ensure that black people would be included—let alone included equally.” Although both slaves and free blacks throughout the United States worked to secure their own educational opportunities, sometimes at great personal risk, Euro-Americans simultaneously attempted to “expel blacks from the body politic.”⁶⁸ Elite Creeks simultaneously worked to exclude individuals with high degrees of African American ancestry from their own nation during the same period. Excluding African American and Afro-Creeks from institutions allowed Creek leaders an opportunity to exercise political sovereignty by drawing boundaries around Creek identity and clearly defining who belonged and who did not.

As the manual labor schools became increasingly exclusive based on race, class, and cultural orientation, it became apparent that they would not fill the demands of Creek citizens for access to education. Even then, while Tullahassee and Asbury together accommodated approximately 160 students, this represented only a small, privileged fraction of children. Neighborhood schools, however, would make basic education available for the majority of youths. Local leaders worked to fill the gaps as more towns desired to have schools opened within their

⁶⁶H. Templeton to the Secretary of Indian Affairs, 23 November 1851, Letters Received by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, slide 1444, roll 785, record group 75, National Archives, M234.

⁶⁷Creek Chiefs in Council to Luke Lea, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1851, Letters Received by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, slide 50–51, roll 786, record group 75, National Archives, M234.

⁶⁸Moss, *Schooling Citizens*, 13.

communities. One teacher noted, "Education is steadily becoming a subject of deeper interest, and is gaining a firmer hold, on the affections of the Creek people," yet many children throughout the Creek Nation lived in isolated areas too far from the schools.⁶⁹ Some parents even moved their families and households to be closer to neighborhood schools so that all of their children could attend classes.⁷⁰ By 1853, four government day schools under the administration of the Creek agent were in operation, in addition to Asbury, Tullahassee, and Coweta, and the Baptist mission school at North Fork.⁷¹

As the neighborhood schools opened, the first generation of educated Creek teachers worked to school their fellow community members and served as models of educated Creek citizens. They represented a new cohort whose English literacy and intellectual capacities could be put to use for the good of the Creek people. Thomas Carr stepped into this role when he agreed to teach at a school in Cusseta, located far within the western interior of the Creek Nation. Carr, a member of the Cusseta town, had been among the dozens of Creek boys educated at Choctaw Academy in Kentucky before removal. Anxious for their children to receive "the benefits of the school they had been promised," people from as far as twenty miles outside of the neighborhood enlisted him to rent a building and lead a school until they could construct a permanent facility. Carr took note of the clear shift in Creek attitudes toward schools, remarking that his town, which consisted of predominantly "full-blood Indians," had until quite recently "been the most noted for their prejudice and opposition to all reform . . . as well as their unqualified hostility to education and the religion of the great white man." Instead, he now found "nothing can exceed the interest they manifest in my school."⁷²

Indeed, the culturally conservative members of Cusseta made the new school a central part of their community without imposition from federal officials or missionaries. During the first term, the building accommodated thirty-five pupils, including twenty-three males and twelve females ranging in age from seven to eighteen. Their families actively engaged with the school. Carr wrote, "There is hardly a day that passes but what the school-house is thronged by the parents of the children who do everything to inspire the children with ambition to excel each other in their studies."⁷³ As an educated, English-literate Creek, Carr demonstrated a clear sense of duty in passing his skills

⁶⁹D. B. Aspberry to Colonel W.H. Garrett, July 24, 1853, ARCIA, 1853, 390.

⁷⁰For example, see Grayson, *A Creek Warrior for the Confederacy*, 41.

⁷¹See Reports on Creek Schools, ARCIA, 1853, 388–95.

⁷²Thomas Carr to Colonel W. H. Garrett, 20 August 1853, ARCIA, 1853, 394–95.

⁷³Ibid.

and knowledge along to his town members. He explained, "I once like my little pupils—could not speak a word in the English language; but the school and my kind teachers made a wonderful change in me."⁷⁴ The close involvement of the Cusseta community and Carr's role as a homegrown teacher working among his own townspeople highlights the degree to which Creek individuals and communities incorporated western-style schools into their world.

By the mid-1850s, the demand for day schools in various neighborhoods intensified and several new schools opened. In 1855, twelve neighborhood schools "located by the chiefs in the towns most populous and able to sustain them" operated in the Creek Nation. These included Hitchet, Chehaw, Tallassa, Hlob-Hlocco, Choaska, Deep Fork Tuleva Thloco, and Hillube, many of these being the first schools in particular portions of Creek country. The Hlob-Hlocco school, for instance, was located on the "extreme frontier" near Comanche territory, and all but one of the students were "natives of the whole blood."⁷⁵ Although often remote, these day schools proved successful in providing opportunities for English literacy that had not previously been available to a wide proportion of the population. Whereas the manual labor schools privileged the children of acculturated families by requiring that they spoke English before entering the schools, the day schools afforded non-English-speaking students the opportunity to learn to read and write.

Despite the expansion in the number of neighborhood schools, these local institutions struggled with a number of obstacles in their earliest years. Some neighborhoods like Cusseta had shown so much haste in their desire for schools that they operated in temporary and insufficient facilities. The teacher at the Deep Fork Tuleva Thloco school reported, "We labored under some disadvantages, being under the necessity of occupying a meeting house, which was very unsuitable and uncomfortable."⁷⁶ Intense drought conditions and famine also hampered the progress of schools in some neighborhoods. Mary Lewis, the first female Creek teacher who taught at a school for Euचेe (Yuchi) children at the time, reported "great suffering from scarcity of food" inhibited the school.⁷⁷ Even though the day schools were located in much closer proximity to the homes and families of students, many still had to travel significant distances across the countryside. Distance, famine, illness, and familial obligations also prevented some students from traveling to the school each day. Cultural differences in

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Reports on Creek Schools, ARCIA, 1855, 461–471.

⁷⁶W. H. Allen to Colonel W. H. Garrett, 5 September 1855, ARCIA, 469.

⁷⁷M. J. Lewis to Colonel W. H. Garrett, 28 August 1855, ARCIA, 468.

child-rearing further contributed to irregular attendance. Creek parents did not use force or coercion to make their children attend every day.

White contemporaries pointed to these problems as a failure of the Creeks' progress toward "civilization" but did not understand the reasons for them. For instance, Robert Loughridge reported to federal officials that the neighborhood schools were unsuccessful and pushed them to use federal authority to mandate boarding school education instead. He argued, "I have strongly urged the importance of manual labor boarding schools, as the only system suited to the present state of society among the Creeks and Seminoles."⁷⁸ Historians have largely privileged contemporary Euro-Americans' colonial gaze in their interpretations of the neighborhood schools. At best, they dismiss them as insignificant and, at worst, they label them as failed experiments. For instance, Grant Foreman states:

As soon as the novelty of going to school was over . . . they deserted the schoolroom. . . . The teachers could not bring them back and the parents who exercised no discipline whatever over their children, would not, and hence they absented themselves at pleasure. . . . This was the testimony also of teachers and missionaries laboring among the Cherokee and Choctaw for more than thirty years.⁷⁹

Euro-American missionaries and early Oklahoma historians such as Foreman failed to interpret the day schools of indigenous nations in Indian Territory within the broader context of education in the antebellum United States. Education reports from Northern states during the 1840s and 1850s feature an overwhelming number of grievances over school conditions. These included "Short terms, irregular attendance, bad facilities, shortsighted and penurious district control, poor teachers, insufficient supervision, lack of uniformity, and indifferent parental support were among the chief complaints."⁸⁰ Thus, the struggles of the early day schools were not unique to Creeks, nor did they represent a failure of Creek "progress" and "civilization." Instead, they were characteristic of primary education in the United States at the time. Like their Euro-American counterparts, Creek politicians and educators took note of these problems and attempted to implement reform.

Unlike schools for Euro-American children in the United States, however, Creek neighborhood schools faced a particularly

⁷⁸R. M. Loughridge to Colonel W. H. Garrett, 13 September 1859, ARCIA 1859, 549–50.

⁷⁹Grant Foreman, *The Five Civilized Tribes* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1934), 206–07.

⁸⁰Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic*, 106.

challenging obstacle: the language barrier.⁸¹ Although Thomas Carr and other Creek teachers served in several day schools, non-Muskogee-speaking teachers taught others. This posed a serious obstacle for any children who did not understand the English language. Americus L. Hay, the white teacher at the Tuckabatchee school, found the language barrier between himself and his students to be a serious challenge. Indignant, he wrote the Creek agent, "As I informed you last year, we are much hindered in teaching because the scholars do not understand English, and I am assured it should be required for the children to speak English." This decision, however, was not Hay's to make. Carr recognized the problem, noting, "Teachers who do not understand the Creek have many difficulties to encounter in their efforts to educate Creek children." Carr himself even felt challenged by the fact that his students only seemed to want to speak the English language at his insistence. Rather than trying to exclude these students, he experimented with a different approach. He selected two or more who had a good grasp of English and encouraged them to lead by example.⁸²

Despite the various obstacles, Creeks belonging to towns with diverse cultural orientations and geographic locations embraced the day school model. This served as a mechanism for educating a broader swath of Creek children, who did not necessarily belong to the most economically affluent, acculturated, and politically powerful families. By diversifying and expanding the types of schooling funded by the nation, the Creek Council ensured that its members, rather than the federal government, served as the primary facilitator of Creek education.

In 1856, leaders took further steps to solidify control over schools. In a treaty negotiated with the Seminoles and the United States, the Creek government sold a tract of land to the Seminoles in exchange for additional annuities. The treaty stipulated, "It being the desire of the Creeks to employ their own teachers" they would control their own education funds. It also included a clause that specified the federal government would pay the Creek treasurer annuities whenever the Creek Council directed and, thereafter, it would allocate those funds. This move secured an education fund controlled by the Creek government.⁸³

⁸¹ Euro-American educators in the Southwestern territories also faced the language barrier with the Spanish-speaking population. For a community-level analysis, see Carlos Kevin Blanton, *The Strange Career of Bilingual Education in Texas, 1836–1981* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2004), 24–41.

⁸² Thomas Carr to Colonel W. H. Garrett, 15 September 1855, ARCIA, 470–71.

⁸³ "Treaty with the Creeks, etc. 1856," *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties*, ed. Charles Joseph Kappler, vol. II (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1904), 760.

The Council then took the next steps toward establishing a fledgling day school system. It opened seven neighborhood schools in the nation's Arkansas and Canadian districts. The creation of two new positions—Superintendent of Schools for the Arkansas District and Superintendent of Schools for the Canadian District—also marked a shift in authority over Creek education. The Creek superintendents assumed direct responsibility for oversight over the schools in each district, tracked attendance and pupils' progress, and reported to the national council on their progress.⁸⁴ This also limited the supervisory capacity of the Creek agent and the federal government over education. Although the creation of the Creek school system reflects the transition of the Creek government toward a more centralized governing body, the division of school districts between the Arkansas and Canadian districts highlights the continued structuring presence of Upper and Lower town divisions.

In addition to funding and administering these early neighborhood schools, the Creek Council also followed the example of the Cherokee and Choctaw governments by decreasing dependency on white educators. That year, the Cherokee Superintendent of Public Schools reported, "I have made it a rule to employ native teachers educated at our own schools in preference to others." Indeed, in 1856, Cherokee teachers had directed all but three of the twenty-one Cherokee common schools.⁸⁵ The Creek Council also encouraged graduates of the manual labor schools to teach the new neighborhood schools. Thus, the manual labor schools became a mechanism for expanding schools in the Creek Nation by providing the first generation of homegrown and well-trained Creek teachers. Some, including Mary Lewis and Robert Carr, had already taken up this task, and more joined their ranks in the years to come. Whereas white Christian missionaries continued to direct the manual labor schools, the early neighborhood schools became learning environments where Creek students learned directly from indigenous teachers. The public role of educated Creek superintendents of schools and teachers also reinforced the emerging notion that the future of the Creek Nation depended on a new generation of educated leaders and citizens.

The number of pupils in the fourteen Creek day schools increased once they fell under the supervision of the Creek government. In 1855, an estimated three hundred students attended the day schools that operated under the direction of the Creek agent. By 1858, however, the

⁸⁴G. Herrod to Colonel W. H. Garrett, Sept. 8, 1858, ARCIA, 1858, 499; James M. C. Smith, 24 September 1858, ARCIA, 1858, 500–01.

⁸⁵W. A. Duncan, Superintendent of Public Schools, to the National Council, ARCIA, 1856, 693–94.

two superintendents reported a combined number of 403 neighborhood school enrollees. Several students mastered English literacy and moved on to more-advanced subjects, including history, geography, and arithmetic. Superintendent James Smith observed the progress of the pupils “has been fully equal to that of any children; which, considering that many were entirely ignorant of the English language, induces great hopes for the future.” Indeed, it was thoughts of the future that enticed many parents who had previously been resistant to western-style schools to test the new neighborhood schools. They began “awakening to a more lively interest in their children’s welfare and improvement.”⁸⁶

Although the Civil War temporarily shut down the fledgling education system, the postwar Creek Nation built upon the successes of the early educational experiments. Just over a decade after the war, the Creek education system had developed into a central national institution. In 1878, twenty-eight day schools and two mission schools operated in Creek country. The national council contributed \$26,500 toward education—\$12,000 for the day schools, \$11,000 for the mission schools, and \$3,500 to support eighteen male students in U.S. colleges.⁸⁷ In the decades that followed, this system continued to expand, offering Creek citizens far more advantageous educational opportunities than Euro-American settlers who colonized Indian Territory by the end of the nineteenth century.⁸⁸

During the second half of the century, then, the Creek Council effectively negotiated political control over their own schools. Meanwhile, the rest of the nation exercised authority over the role that education played in shaping their society as an extension of their political sovereignty. Creek citizens with diverse racial and class identities, cultural orientations, and political inclinations contested their rights to education and debated the role it should play in the future of their nation. This is not to say that traditional forms of Creek education did

⁸⁶Colonel W. H. Garrett to C. W. Dean, Superintendent of Indian Affairs, 24 August 1855, ARCIA, 1855, 458; G. Herrod to Colonel W. H. Garrett, Sept. 8, 1858, ARCIA, 1858, 499; James M. C. Smith to Colonel W. H. Garrett, 24 September 1858, ARCIA, 1858, 501.

⁸⁷S. Rep. No. 744, at 112 (1839).

⁸⁸The Five Tribes excluded noncitizens residing within their territory from their public schools, unless they received permission and paid tuition. After numerous petitions from settlers, Congress commissioned an investigation. The report, “Education of White and Negro Children in The Indian Territory,” indicated an estimated 30,000 white children and 25,000 African-American children “were shut out from the schools supported by the governments of the five nations of Indians who control the territory, as well as from those supported by the United States for the benefit of Indian youth.” The result was “a mass of more than 50,000 children of both races, of school age, for whose education, either industrial or literary, there is no provision whatever.” See Department of the Interior, “Education of White and Negro Children in Indian Territory,” (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1898), 1–2.

not endure alongside this new institutional form. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the autonomy of nineteenth-century indigenous nations in building, contesting, and participating in their own political and social institutions, such as the national school systems that emerged among the Five Tribes.⁸⁹

In their foundational study of indigenous education and self-determination in the twentieth century, K. Tsianina Lomawaima and Teresa L. McCarty accurately generalize that the history of American Indian education “illustrates the costs of repressive, standardizing schooling that abrogates the rights of local choice and control.” The Creek Nation, as well as the Cherokee, Choctaw, and Chickasaw nations, did not fit this model. They built systems of education within the bounds of their nations and under the control of their national governments. This allowed them to exercise successfully the “rights of local choice and control.”⁹⁰ While the colonial power of the federal government still loomed large over the Creek Nation, citizens continuously resisted U.S. authority to pursue their own national interests. Lomawaima and McCarty suggest, “The education of American Indian children has been at the very center of the battleground between federal and tribal powers.”⁹¹ During the mid-to-late nineteenth century, the sovereign Creek Nation was winning the battle.

When the Creek Nation’s education system is placed within the larger framework of American educational history rather than within a local context, it becomes even more illuminating. As historian William Reese argues in his comprehensive study, *America’s Public Schools: From the Common School to “No Child Left Behind,”* “Historically, legally, and practically, public schools are in fact largely controlled by state laws and

⁸⁹Donald Warren provides critique of the focus on institutions within the history of Native American education by arguing they can imply “prior to Euroamerican invasions the Indigenous peoples of the United States lacked enduring practices and teaching and learning.” Natives not only possessed diverse and enduring forms of education prior to European contact but also continued to employ them during the nineteenth century. Creeks did not simply borrow western systems of knowledge and western-style schools. Instead, they adapted English literacy and schools as their own institutions. I maintain that there are important historical lessons to be learned from examining indigenous-controlled social institutions. This essay complements David Wallace Adams’s response to the essays in the *History of Education Quarterly*’s thematic issue on the education history of Native Americans. Adams argues that while there is still much work to be done, “don’t forget about the schools.” Donald Warren, “*American Indian Histories as Education History*,” *History of Education Quarterly* 54, no. 3 (August 2014), 263; and David Wallace Adams, “Beyond Horace Mann: Telling Stories about Indian Education,” *History of Education Quarterly* 54, no. 3 (August 2014), 385.

⁹⁰K. Tsianina Lomawaima and Teresa L. McCarty, “*To Remain an Indian*”: *Lessons in Democracy from a Century of Native American Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2006), 5

⁹¹Lomawaima and McCarty, *Lessons in Democracy*, 5.

locally governed.”⁹² Unlike American public schools, which remained decentralized throughout the nineteenth century, citizens of the Creek Nation increasingly centralized their schools to form a national system. This did not take place in urban centers in the North, where common school systems flourished. Instead, the Creek Nation, along with the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee, and Seminole Nations, developed extensive systems of primary and secondary schools in rural areas west of the Mississippi. Although Opothleyohola died before he could see his nation’s education system come to full fruition, by the end of the nineteenth century, Creek education functioned as he had envisioned. It produced generations of Creeks who maintained “a love of their race so that they may stand between us and trouble.”⁹³

⁹²William J. Reese, *America’s Public Schools*, 1. For an examination of the urban North as the nexus of the common school movement, see pages 10–44.

⁹³Opothleyohola from W. B. Morrison’s “Father Murrow” in *My Oklaboma*, file 1, box 1, Opothleyohola Collection, Native American Manuscripts, WHC.