

**MARY
COOMBS
GREENLEAF**
1800-1857



**DEDICATED
WOMAN
ON A
MISSION**

Wapanucka Academy recruited a large number of teachers and missionaries from different states. Among those was Mary Greenleaf, who taught there for a year before taking ill while nursing sick students. Her remains were laid to rest under one of the many large trees, close to the work she loved.

Mary Coombs Greenleaf was born in January 1800 in Newburyport, Massachusetts. Her mother was the daughter of a Revolutionary sailor and a prominent citizen of Newburyport. Her father was the son of a Revolutionary soldier. Educational advantages for girls were limited in the early part of the 19th century, but Greenleaf studied the Bible and books written by Watts and Doddridge. In early 1850s she wrote "Memoirs of Mary Greenleaf", dedicated to her mother, which were published and widely read in religious circles of the day.

From girlhood, Mary's one ambition was to enter the foreign mission service. Duty at home interfered with her purpose for 34 years, for her mother suffered total blindness while Mary was still a young woman. Beside caring for her mother and keeping the home, she taught a primary school and devoted herself to church work. After the death of her mother in 1855, Mary was free to undertake the work she had long contemplated. Yet there was another obstacle in the way. The Presbyterian Mission Board usually only selected young applicants. Strong in faith, she traveled to New York to interview, and to her joy, received an appointment at 56 years old.

Before 1850, public education hardly existed among the Chickasaws in Indian Territory. They received appropriations from the federal government, which supported students who attended schools in the Choctaw District. The scene changed when Christian missionaries arrived. Wapanucka Female Manual Labor School, located in Johnston County northeast of Tishomingo, was known locally as Allen's Academy, built in 1851 by Captain J. S. Allen. The impressive stone building was also known as the Chickasaw Rock Academy. Reverend Hamilton Ballentine, his wife and two teachers took over the school in 1852, with forty girls soon in attendance.

Wapanucka needed missionaries and Mary answered the call. The trip west was far from luxurious and took almost two months. Mother Nature dealt some fierce weather conditions that would prove challenging to any pioneering spirit. Despite a cyclone, sand gust, extreme heat and violent storms, Greenleaf's memoir later stated: "we got along without any trouble worth naming".

Greenleaf arrived in 1856, and soon was happy in her work and charmed by the beautiful location of the school. She wrote back to her friends in the East, describing the flowers and the birds, the hills and prairies of the surrounding countryside. She told about the Indian children for whom she had a deep affection. The home economics instruction at Wapanucka was unique. The girls were divided into "families" with all ages and sizes and were under the care of an adult supervisor. It was believed this more closely approximated the conditions of home life, making for a more meaningful learning experience.

Early in the summer of 1857, a dysentery epidemic broke out in the school. Experienced as a nurse, Greenleaf cared for sick children. She was later stricken with the disease and died in June 1857 at age 57. A year after her death, Mary's memoir "Life and Letters of Miss Mary C. Greenleaf" was published for the Massachusetts Sabbath School Society. It described her church work, which led to her missionary life in Indian Territory. Although she only taught there for a year, Mary made a lasting impact on Wapanucka Academy and its students.

In July 1860 the Mission Board ceased operations at Wapanucka due to lack of funds so the Confederates used the building during the Civil War. It was reopened as a boys' school in 1890 and then permanently closed in 1911. During the years since the abandonment of the academy, visitors to that historic spot have come away wondering about the words engraved on the marble tombstone on the lonely hillside – "For only one year was she permitted to labour among the Chickasaws." Time has passed but Mary Greenleaf has not been forgotten.