

The Academies of the Choctaws and Chickasaws

-Red River Historian website



WAPANUCKA INSTITUTE TODAY

The Wapanucka Academy was also known as the "Rock Academy" north of Boggy Depot. It educated Chickasaw girls.

The academies established by the Choctaws and Chickasaws in Indian Territory were mission schools.

Not much remains of the many day and boarding schools that dotted the landscape around Oklahoma's Red River Valley. Just like with everything else in our standardized world,

education has become a national, rather than a community, affair. The Choctaw and Chickasaw communities in the middle 19th century, however, invested a great deal in localized education, knowing fully well what could happen if they didn't.

Forced "Assimilation"

Throughout American history, Indians were given two "options:" assimilate, or be annihilated. While early tribes fought to the bitter end against the European invaders, other tribes learned that the only way to preserve themselves was by becoming more like the whites. Churches established missionary schools to teach Indians how to be more "Christian" and "American." Often, schools were placed not within tribal communities, but in far off locations, thus forcing children to live apart from their families. This strategy had an intended effect: the schools rid the Indians of their culture, all under the guise of "education."

Tactic of War?

This forced assimilation became a well-used tactic after the Plains Indian Wars of the 1870s. Hundreds of children from the Sioux, Dakota, Blackfeet, and Cheyenne tribes (the Comanches and Kiowas to a far lesser degree*) were sent to boarding schools in far-away states like Pennsylvania, where they could be "Americanized." However, while this idea gained wide acceptance in the late 19th century, these kinds of programs had already been initiated under during the Early Republic.

That's why it became very important for the Five Civilized Tribes,* who had been forced to Indian Territory by the Jackson government, to initiate what I'd call a "preemptive strike." They quickly re-established the mission schools that had been placed in their homelands, and over which their nations could maintain some control. They did this with the support of Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist missionary groups, who worked in tandem with the nations to ensure their education.

All On-Board

The Choctaw Nation's first school was established within a decade of their forced ouster into today's Oklahoma. Wheelock Academy, founded in 1832 as a joint effort by Choctaw leaders, Presbyterian missionaries, and Indian Bureau agents, at first operated as a day school for both boys and girls. Girls education, which previously had been neglected, was championed by Choctaw Reverend Israel Folsom.

Religious education was emphasized, though missionaries lamented that the Native Americans were not very receptive to their "Americanization" efforts. Located just east of Fort Towson, Wheelock later became a boarding school for girls, with nearby Norwalk Academy serving boys. Armstrong Academy, founded in 1845, became the premier Choctaw school. It was self-sustaining, with corn fields and vegetable gardens. Adults attended the school on Saturdays to learn how to read and write, and students learned algebra, classical literature, and geography as well as mechanical and domestic skills. In 1862, Armstrong Academy became the seat of the Choctaw confederacy, and continued to serve as the Choctaw Nation capitol until the 1880s.

Other academies along the eastern Red River in Indian Territory included the Spencer Academy for boys, founded in 1842 north of Doaksville; the 1850's Bloomfield Academy for girls near the Colbert's Ferry landing; and Wapanucka Academy for girls (it was co-educational for a time), which opened northeast of Boggy Depot. These schools operated as day schools, with more local control, and boarding schools, which fell under the governance and church boards and federal agencies. Often, a school that had once been under local control would gradually become a boarding school as population centers shifted away from the schools. After the Chickasaws restored their nationhood in the 1850s, both Bloomfield and Wapanucka Academies came under their sole jurisdiction.

After freedom, academies opened for the people who had been enslaved by the Chickasaws and Choctaws. The most prominent one in the Red River Valley was Oak Hill, located in McCurtain County along the old military road east of Fort Towson. Founded in 1869, this school emphasized manual labor, not academic instruction. At first, black men taught at the school, but they were replaced by white teachers recruited from northern states, and the school acted as a farm demonstration place.

Destruction

The academies lasted into the early 20th century. For a brief while, they co-existed with federal "Indian schools" near military forts established in western Indian Territory after the Plains and Red River wars forced tribes like the Comanches and Kiowas onto reservations.

Most Chickasaw and Choctaw nationals, especially those who could not afford room and board in an academy, preferred sending their children to local, public schools within their jurisdictions and did not want to cede authority to other parties anymore. The academies for blacks closed too, and the students were placed in segregated public schools. As attendance waned, most of the old

school buildings were consumed by fire. The wooden buildings of the Bloomfield Academy, which had moved from its original location near Colbert to a newer site in at Ardmore, burned down at least three times before the decision was made to abandon the school. Armstrong Academy was mostly brick built, but it, too, experienced fires. A young woman from Doaksville recounted her visits to the destroyed Armstrong Academy in the 1930s, where she remembered "piles of bones" laying about in what used to be the anatomy lab. Spencer Academy also succumbed to a fiery death. Exceptions were the Wapanucka Academy, which slowly crumbled away after it closed in 1911, and Oak Hill Academy, which closed in 1936 and the buildings were torn down.

Three academies still exist along the Red River. Wheelock Academy is now a National Historic Landmark, and the grounds are open for touring. While many of the outbuildings are in ruins, the wooden and white-washed administration building, built in the 1880s, stands in the center. A free museum is housed inside a wooden dormitory building. Nearby is the Wheelock Presbyterian Church, built of solid stone and dedicated in 1847. The adjacent graveyard includes many burials of children who succumbed to Scarlett fever.

The original school building for the Burney Institute, a Chickasaw academy for girls, still stands in Marshall County, Oklahoma. The school was a mile or so away from an important ferry crossing, had its own post office, and served many of the children whose families settled around Fort Washita. From 1845 to around 1910, it was a prominent landmark for the nation, but after it closed, it was sold at auction and became a private residence. I need to find out how the school building was sold... there's something not right with that, but it may have to do with the Dawes allotments. Luckily, the nation has taken over the building again and is slowly restoring it.

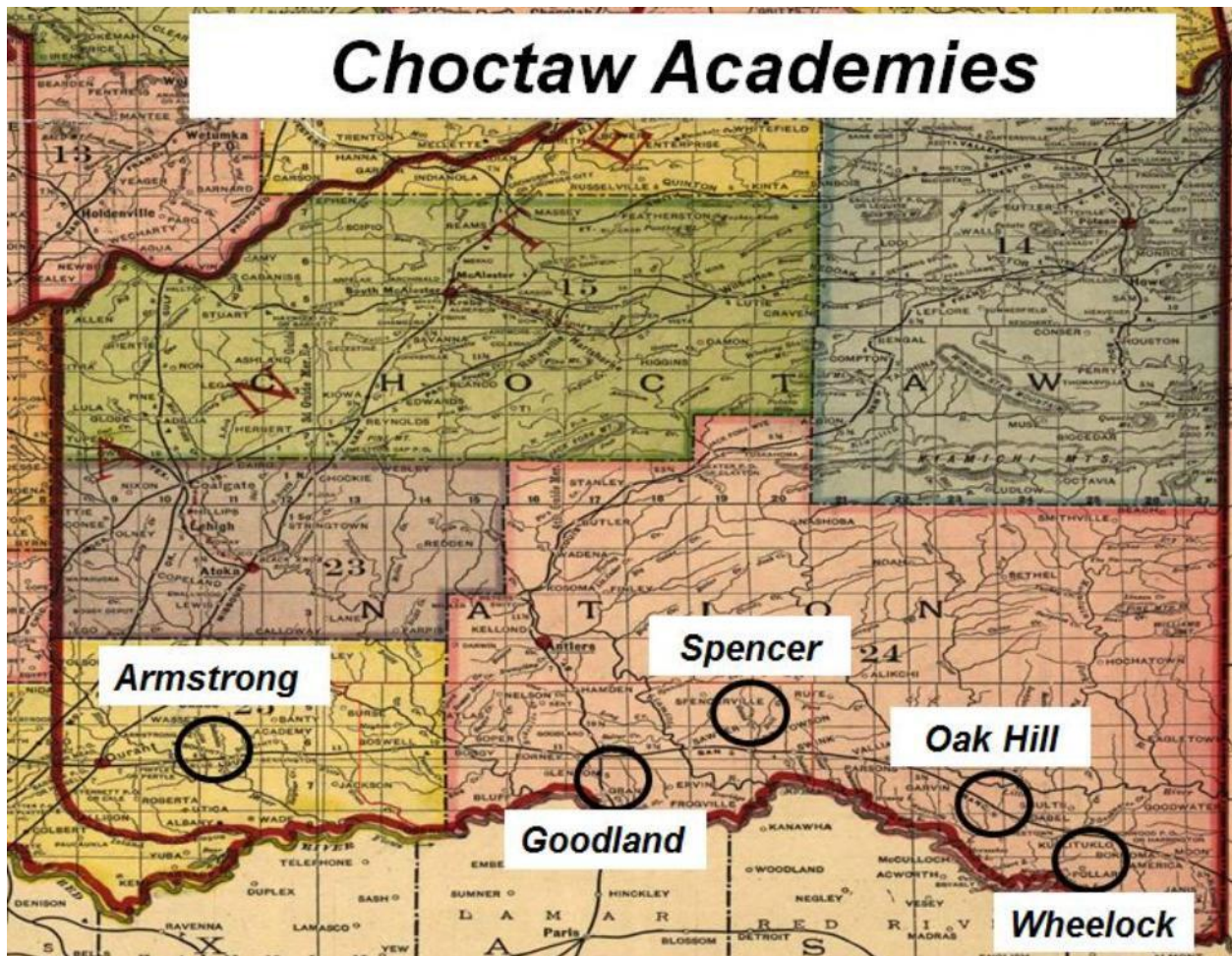
The most impressive of these academies is Goodland, but not because of its architecture. Of all the academies I've mentioned (and a few I didn't), Goodland is the only one still in operation. Established in the 1850s as a mission school for orphaned Indians*** near Grant, Goodland is now a Presbyterian boarding school, taking care of children regardless of religious, national, sexual, familial, socio-economic, or racial affiliation.

Except for Goodland, Burney, and Wheelock, these historic schools only exist as entries in history books. Often, archaeological surveys are needed just to pinpoint their locations. The only evidence of Armstrong, Bloomfield, Wapanucka, Oak Hill, and Spencer Academies consist of inaccessible cemeteries on private property. Other academies I did not mention have not even received National Register status because nothing remains of them. These school are, without a doubt, incredibly important to Oklahoma history, and should be commemorated.

*The term "Civilized Tribes" denotes mission education.

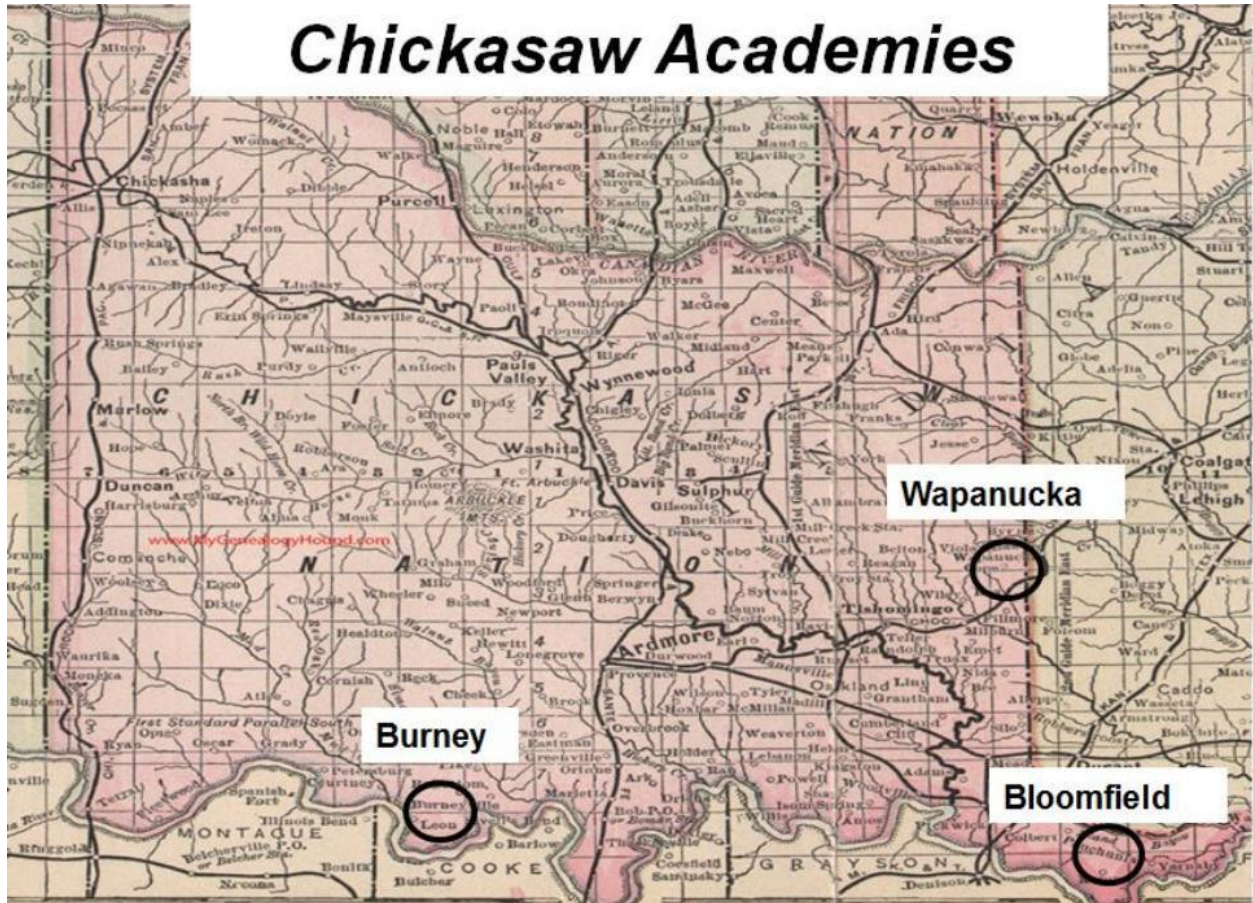
**The Comanches, Kiowas, Caddos, Wichitas, Cheyennes, Arapahos, and Apaches were educated at Fort Sill in federal schools, which were often managed and supervised by Quakers. Some of the children were sent to boarding schools along the U.S. east coast for "re-education." Treatment inside these camps led to suicides and loss of attachment to the old ways. It is important to remember that Quakers established the idea of "solitary confinement" and harsh penitentiaries to force "re-civilization."

***The many "orphans" who appeared in the nations may have been a ploy to steal allotment lands. This is a topic I'm currently researching.



The Choctaw nation was the first to establish mission academies in Indian Territory. Wheelock is now a national historic site and museum, and Goodland continues to be a boarding school (this is not a comprehensive map).

Chickasaw Academies



The academies for Chickasaw nationals focused on girls' education. Only the Burney Institute still stands (this is not a comprehensive map).



Spencer Academy was built in 1842 for Choctaw boys. After the Civil War, the school re-opened and added nearby Oak Hill Industrial Academy to educate Choctaw freedmen. The famous and well known gospel, "Swing lo, Sweet Chariot" was first sung and heard and recorded at the Spencer Academy by freed people "Uncle Wallace and Aunt Minerva" (OHS).