

# **A Short History of Spencer Academy, Doaksville and Fort Towson in Indian Territory**



Rev. Alexander Reid

Rev. Alexander Reid, principal of Spencer Academy, was a native of Scotland, and came to this country in his boyhood. He graduated from the college at Princeton, N. J., in 1845, and the theological seminary there, three years later. He was ordained by the Presbytery of New York in 1849 and accepting a commission to serve as a missionary to the Indians of the Choctaw Nation in Indian Territory, was immediately appointed superintendent of Spencer Academy, ten miles north of Fort Towson.

He was accompanied by Rev. Alexander J. Graham, a native of Newark, New Jersey, who served as a teacher in the academy. The latter was a roommate of Reid's at Princeton seminary, and his sister became Reid's wife. At the end of his first year of service he returned to Lebanon Springs, New York, for the recovery of his health, and died there July 23, 1850. Rev. John Edwards immediately became his successor as a teacher.

Alexander Reid while pursuing his studies learned the tailor's trade at West Point and this proved a favorable introduction to his work among the Choctaws. They were surprised and greatly pleased on seeing that he had already learned the art of sitting on the ground "tailor fashion" according to their own custom.

The academy under Reid enjoyed a prosperous career of twelve years. In 1861, when the excitement of war absorbed the attention of everybody, the school work was abandoned. Reid, however, continued to serve as a gospel missionary among the Indians until 1869, when he took his family to Princeton, New Jersey, to provide for the education of his children.

While ministering to the spiritual needs of the Indians his sympathies and interest were awakened by the destitute and helpless condition of their former slaves. In 1878 he resumed work as a missionary to the Choctaws making his headquarters at or near Atoka and in 1882 he was appointed by the Foreign Mission Board, superintendent of mission work among the Freedmen in Indian Territory. In this capacity he aided in establishing neighborhood schools wherever teachers could be found. In order that a number of them might be fitted for teaching, he obtained permission of their parents to take a number of bright looking and promising young people to boarding schools, maintained by our Freedmen's Board in Texas, Mississippi and North Carolina. He thus became instrumental in preparing the way, and advised the development of the native Oak Hill School into an industrial and normal boarding school.

In 1884, owing to failing health, he went to the home of his son, Rev. John G. Reid (born at Spencer Academy in 1854), at Greeley, Colorado, and died at 72 at Cambridgeport, near Boston, July 30, 1890.

“He was a friend to truth, of soul sincere, of manners unaffected and of mind enlarged, he wished the good of all mankind.”

### **Uncle Wallace and Aunt Minerva**

Uncle Wallace and Aunt Minerva were two of the colored workers that were employed at Spencer Academy, before the war. They lived together in a little cabin near it. In the summer evenings they would often sit at the door of the cabin and sing their favorite plantation songs, learned in Mississippi in their early youth.



### Swing low, sweet Chariot

In 1871, when the Jubilee singers first visited Newark, New Jersey, Rev. Alexander Reid happened to be there and heard them. The work of the Jubilee singers was new in the North and attracted considerable and very favorable attention. But when Prof. White, who had charge of them, announced several concerts to be given in different Churches of the city he added,

“We will have to repeat the Jubilee songs as we have no other.”

When Mr. Reid was asked how he liked them he remarked,

“Very well, but I have heard better ones.”

When he had committed to writing a half dozen of the plantation songs he had heard “Wallace and Minerva” sing with so much delight at old Spencer Academy, he met Mr. White and his company in Brooklyn, New York, and spent an entire day rehearsing them. These new songs included,

“Steal away to Jesus.”

“The Angels are Coming,”

“I’m a Rolling,” and “Swing low, sweet Chariot.”

“Steal Away to Jesus” became very popular and was sung before Queen Victoria.

The Hutchinson family later used several of them in their concerts, rendering “I’m a Rolling,” with a trumpet accompaniment to the words:

“The trumpet sounds in my soul,  
I haint got long to stay here.”

These songs have now been sung around the world.

When one thinks of the two old slaves singing happily together at the door of their humble cabin, amid the dreary solitudes of Indian Territory, and the widely extended results that followed, he cannot help perceiving in these incidents a practical illustration of the way in which our Heavenly Father uses “things that are weak,” for the accomplishment of his gracious purposes. They also serve to show how little we know of the future use God will make of the lowly service any of us may now be rendering.

These two slaves giving expression to their devotional feelings in simple native songs, unconsciously exerted a happy influence that was felt even in distant lands; an influence that served to attract attention and financial support to an important institution, established for the education of the Freedmen.

### **New Spencer Academy**

In the fall of 1881 the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions re-established Spencer Academy in a new location where the post office was called, Nelson, ten miles southwest of Antlers and twenty miles west of old Spencer, now called Spencerville.

Rev. Oliver P. Stark, the first superintendent of this institution, died there at the age of 61, March 2, 1884. He was a native of Goshen, New York, and a graduate of the college and Theological Seminary at Princeton, N. J. In 1851, he was ordained by the Presbytery of Indian, which, as early as 1840, had been organized to include the missions of the American Board.

As early as 1849, while he was yet a licentiate, he was commissioned as a missionary to the Choctaws, and, locating at Goodland, remained in charge of the work in that section until 1866, a period of seventeen years. During the next thirteen years he served as principal of the Lamar Female Seminary at Paris, Texas. His next and last work was the development of the mission school for the Choctaws at Nelson, which had formed a part of his early and long pastorate.

Rev. Harvey R. Schermerhorn, became the immediate successor of Mr. Stark as superintendent of the new Spencer Academy and continued to serve in that capacity until 1890, when the mission work among the Indians was transferred from the Foreign to the care of the Home Mission Board. The school was then discontinued and he became pastor of the Presbyterian Church at Macalester. After a long and very useful career he is now living in retirement at Hartshorne.

These incidents, relating to the work of the Presbyterian Church among the Indians, especially the Choctaws, have been narrated, because the men who had charge of these two educational institutions at Wheelock and Spencer Academies, were very helpful in effecting the organization of Presbyterian Churches, the establishment of Oak Hill Academy and a number of neighborhood schools among the Freedmen in the south part of the Choctaw Nation.

## **Doaksville and Fort Towson**

Rev. Cyrus Kingsbury, an early Presbyterian missionary to the Choctaws, was located at Doaksville near old Fort Towson. He secured the erection of an ample Church building and rendered many years of faithful service. He died and was buried in the cemetery at that place in 1870.

Doaksville, though no longer entitled to a place on the map, is the name of an important pioneer Indian village. Here the proud and powerful Choctaws established themselves during the later twenties, and were regarded as happy and prosperous before the Civil War.

Fort Towson was built by the government to protect them from incursions on the part of the wild Kiowa and Comanche, who still roamed over the plains of Texas. The name of Ulysses S. Grant was associated with it just before the Mexican war. The generous hospitality of Col. Garland, who died there after a long period of service, is still gratefully remembered.

During its most prosperous days, which were long before the Civil War, a considerable number of aristocratic Choctaws, claiming large plantations in the neighboring valleys, dwelt there near each other. Some were men of culture and university education, while others were ignorant and superstitious. Some had previously enjoyed the acquaintance and friendship of Andrew Jackson and Zachary Taylor, and greatly appreciated the

privilege of manifesting their chivalrous spirit. Berthlett's store, now used as a stable, was a noted trading establishment and place of social resort. Its owner was a native of Canada, who had come to live among the Choctaws.

While living in this beautiful country, where they were paternally protected from poverty at home and the encroachments of enemies abroad it has been said they were so addicted to private quarrels and fatal combats, that there was scarcely a Choctaw family that did not have its tragedy of blood. These fatal tribal feuds, however, seldom occurred except on gala days, and the preparations there for included a supply of "fire-water."

The old Doaksville cemetery occupies the slope of a hillside near a little stream skirted with timber. Some of the leading pioneers of the Choctaw nation were buried here. The marble tablets that mark their graves were brought by steam boat from New Orleans, up the Mississippi and Red rivers to a landing four miles south. Some of the graves are walled and covered with a marble slab, while others are marked by the erection over them of oddly shaped little houses. In the early days, the full-bloods were in the habit of burying with the body some favorite trinket or article of personal adornment. Many of the grave stones attest the fact that the deceased while living enjoyed a good hope of a blessed immortality through our Lord Jesus Christ.

### **The Bible An Important Factor in Civilization and Education**

While our religious educational institutions where nonsectarian instruction in the Bible is fundamental, have been producing good results of the highest order, those educational institutions where only secular instruction is given, have been contributing a very small proportion of the world's consecrated moral leaders. Of 1,600 home missionaries, 1,503 received their training in Christian educational institutions. Of 600 foreign missionaries, 551 received their training in Christian educational institutions.

It is not correct to say that one standard of education is as good as another. Fourteen American colleges, recently established in China by the Christian Missionaries, though only meagerly equipped, but manned by those of unquestioned Christian character, and teaching the plain saving truths of the Bible, have become educational centers, from which have gone out the leaders in a peaceful revolution that occurred there in 1912, that have brought the boon of civil and religious liberty to one-fourth of the population

of the world. Under the beneficent influence of a few Christian leaders this ancient empire has been lifted off its hinges and a new life and spirit of progress have been infused into a civilization, hoary with centuries of stagnant heathenism. In this wonderful transformation, effected by trained Christian teachers, the Church and the world have seen the fulfillment of the Bible prediction, "A nation shall be born in a day."

Training for a noble Christian life is many times better than training merely to make a living. The demand for good and true men, to serve as leaders in Church and state was never greater than at present. The aim of the Church is to supply the world with capable leaders that are "Christ-led and Bible-fed."

A right education knows no limit of breadth. It includes a knowledge of the Infinite as well as the finite. It recognizes the fact that finite things can not be rightly understood without knowing their relation to the Infinite. Our Lord Jesus, who came into the world to make known the will of the Father, "holds in his girdle the key to all the secrets of the universe, and no education can be thorough without the knowledge of Him."

Christian schools are established for the culture of souls. Their aim is to develop men and women as persons to the full extent of their powers for the sake of their contribution to the personal welfare and progress of society.

### **The Bible A Power In The Formation Of Character**

All things being equal the thorough Christian makes a better mechanic, a better farmer, a better housekeeper, teacher, doctor, lawyer or business man, than one who is not a Christian. It is the work of a Bible school of instruction to equip its graduates with the very best elements of character and progress, and send them forth tempered and polished for the conquest of the world.

The young have characters to be molded, ideals to be formed, capacities to be enlarged, an efficiency that may be increased, an energy to be centralized, and a hope and faith to be strengthened. The Bible, in the hands of the tactful and faithful Christian teacher accomplishes all of these results, by its precepts and interesting biographies.

The Bible, furnishes the young correct ideals of a noble and useful manhood. The common greed for money, position and outward appearance is weighed in the balance and found wanting.

The Bible is the fountain of all true character, and furnishes the means for the betterment of one's self. It furnished the principles and ideals that enabled Washington, Lincoln, Frances Willard, Queen Victoria, Gladstone and others, to achieve greatness as statesmen, rulers or national leaders; and enabled Gary, Judson, Moffat, Livingstone and others to invade dark, dangerous continents that they might become heralds of gospel light and liberty where they were most needed. "Buy the truth, sell it not, and the truth shall make you free," was the ringing message they proclaimed to men, women and children.

### **The Architect Greater Than The Cathedral**

A tourist, visiting the famous cathedral at Milan, expressed his great surprise at the wonderful vision and perfect ideal of the man, who designed it. A guide remarked, that the mind of the architect, who wrought out the hundred striking features of the design, was greater than the magnificent cathedral. This led another to remark, "Only a mind inspired by Christ could have designed this wonderful building," How true! The love of Christ constrains his people to bring to his service and worship their noblest powers of mind and body.

When the tourist viewed the works of art, which included some of the world's most famous statuary and paintings, he found the master pieces of Michael Angelo, the sculptor, were Moses and David, both of them characters from the Bible; and the most wonderful paintings were those of the person of our Lord Jesus, the only Redeemer of the world.

Hayden and Handel, two of the world's most famous musical composers, were inspired to write their great choral masterpieces, the "Creation" and the "Messiah" as a result of their careful study of the sacred scriptures.

The best the world has produced in law, literature, poetry, music, art and architecture has been the embodiment of ideals that have received their inspiration from reading God's Holy Word, and experiencing saving knowledge of the redeeming work of His blessed Son.

Abraham continues to be the "father of the faithful;" Moses, author of the Pentateuch, continues to be the world's greatest lawgiver and leader of men; Joshua effecting the conquest of Canaan on the principle, "Divide and Conquer," continues to be the inspirer of successful military strategists;



David author of Psalms, continues to be the world's greatest poet; Joseph, Daniel and Isaiah, continue to be the best ideals for rulers and their counselors; Nehemiah, the best representative of a progressive and successful man of affairs; Peter and John, the most noted examples of loyalty to truth; Paul, the most zealous advocate of a great cause; and our Lord Jesus continues to be the ideal of the world's greatest teachers and benefactors.

### **The Basis Of The American Public School System**

“The Bible, the basis of moral instruction in the public school,” was the interesting theme of an address it was the privilege of the author to deliver at a teachers' institute forty years ago, when engaged in teaching in central Pennsylvania. The conviction then became indelibly impressed, that the Bible is really the basis of the American public school system. The fact is now noted with a good deal of interest, that the legislature of Pennsylvania in 1913, enacted a law, distinctly recognizing this fact, and providing that at least ten verses from the Bible shall be read every school day, in the presence of the scholars in every public school within the bounds of the state. Every teacher refusing to comply with this law is subject to dismissal.

Every state in the Union should have a law of this kind. The Bible is not merely the book of books; it is the only one that has correct ideals for young people. It awakens the desire for more knowledge and inspires the courage to do right.

### **The Valley Of Diamonds**

Ruskin, in “The Ethics of Dust”, referring to the valley of diamonds, remarks that “many people go to real places and never see them; and many people pass through this valley of diamonds and never see it.”

One great object to be attained in the education of the mind is to awaken an earnest desire for truth. All real life, whether it be in the school, shop or field, consists in using aright the true principles of life, that are found in the Word of God. Every human heart, that has been illuminated by this Word of Truth, finds that along the pathway that leads to God, there are hidden the gems and jewels of eternal truth, that prevail in every department of life. These gems are hidden only from the careless and indifferent. Those that make a diligent search are sure to find them. This longing desire for truth is

not only the mark of a good student, but the assurance also that such a one, if circumstances are favorable will continue to make progress after school days have ended.

Many pupils, during their youthful school days, fail to perceive the real mission of their education. They do not then fully appreciate the real gold of truth that cultivates in them “those general charities of heart, sincerity of thought, and graces of habit, which are likely to lead them, throughout life to prefer frankness to affectation, reality to shadows, and beauty to corruption.” This enlightenment is pretty sure to come to them later, if the Bible has been their daily text book.

### **The Christian Teacher**

The acceptance of the Bible as the Word of God should be regarded as essential, on the part of all teachers of children and youth.

If the Bible is the great fountain of saving truth and the highest authority on human conduct, and it is to be used as a daily text book, then, it naturally follows, the teacher should be “a workman approved unto God, apt to teach and rightly dividing the word of truth.” Persons who do not believe in the Bible do not care to teach it, and when they are required to do so, they are pretty sure to vaunt their unbelief. The influence of such teachers tends to establish unbelief instead of awakening a longing desire for more truth.

Emerson in one of his essays, after pressing the fact that the soul is the receiver and revealer of truth, states an undeniable fact, when he says:

“That which we are, we shall teach, not voluntarily but involuntarily. Thoughts go out of our minds through avenues, which we never voluntarily opened. Character teaches over our head. The infallible index of true progress is found in the tone the man takes. Neither his age, nor his breeding, nor his company, nor books, nor actions, nor talents, nor all together can hinder him from being deferential to a higher spirit than his own. If he has not found his home in God, his manners, his form of speech, the turn of his sentences, the build, shall I say of all his opinions, will involuntarily confess it, let him brave it out how he will.”

The longings of the human heart are unsatisfied, until the soul finds its home in God, its creator and preserver. Teachers that ignore this fact, lack one

thing that is vitally important. Our Lord Jesus, the great teacher, expressed its relative importance when he said: "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things will be added unto you."

### **A Railroad President**

James J. Hill, a prominent railroad president recently made this important statement:

"We are making a mistake to train our young people in various lines of knowledge for undertaking the big tasks of life, without making sure also that those fundamental principles of right and wrong as taught in the Bible, have become a part of their equipment. There is a control of forces and motives, that is essential to the management of the vast affairs of our nation, which comes only through an educated conscience; and to fail to equip young men, who are to manage the great affairs of the future, with this control and direction, is a serious mistake of the age and bears with it a certain menace for the future."

In a recent issue of the Assembly Herald there appeared the following very pertinent paragraphs on this subject, credited to the Synod of Tennessee:

"In common with all good citizens, we rejoice in the progress of the cause of popular education in our land. The intelligence of our citizenship is a bulwark to the country. But unless the education of the future citizen is complete and symmetrical, the body politic becomes a body partly of iron and partly of potter's clay. The education of the head and the hand without the heart is not enough.

"The popular education has no place for the heart in all of its splendid equipment. This is not a reflection on the fine system. It is merely the statement of a melancholy fact. The average state school, high or low, is absolutely colorless as to religion. Even the morality that is taught is not the morality of the Christian religion, but of philosophical ethics that differ but little from the ethics of the pagan.

"Our state schools have no place for the God of the Bible, nor for the Bible of the only living and true God. The poetry of Homer and Horace are sufficiently honored, but the finer poetry of Moses, Job and David are unknown in the courses of study of our schools, except now and then as

specimens of Oriental song. The wise sayings of Plato and Socrates are reckoned worthy of profound study, while the vastly greater sayings of our Lord Jesus and Paul are unknown. Cicero and Demosthenes are commended as great models of public address, while Isaiah and Ezekiel are seldom mentioned in the four years of college life, or in the longer years of the secondary schools.

“That education is incomplete and inadequate for life’s best, which does not include the whole man, and put first things first. If the heart be not educated and the conscience be not enlightened, the best trained hand may strike in a wrong manner, and the best trained mind pronounce wrong judgments.... Our citizenship must be Christian if it is to promote a Christian civilization.”

**Source:**

AccessGenealogy.com. Web. 15 August 2015.  
<http://www.accessgenealogy.com/oklahoma/history-of-spencer-academy.htm> - Last updated on May 5th, 2012