KENTUCKY'S CHOCTAW ACADEMY, 1819-1842 A COMMERCIAL ENTERPRISE

By Evelyn Crady Adams*

This article is based on a collection of 166 letters written from 1824 to 1841 from Washington, D. C., by Colonel Richard M. Johnson, founder of Choctaw Academy, to the Reverend Thomas Henderson, the Academy's Superintendent in Kentucky. The letters and a number of miscellaneous papers were presented to The Filson Club in 1935 by Mr. Henderson's grandson, Mr. Shelley D. Rouse and Mrs. Rouse of Covington, Kentucky.

Two small time-worn stone buildings and a tiny graveyard somberly mark the site on a bluegrass farm near Georgetown, Scott County, Kentucky, where Choctaw Academy flourished more than a century ago. This historic school was one of the earliest established for Indians of the United States. A total enrollment exceeding fifteen hundred from 1819 to 1842 placed it among the largest and most successful in its day. Close to a half million dollars in federal funds and in treaty annuities from a dozen or more tribes were expended in its maintenance. Choctaw Academy was a government school federally supervised but at the same time it was the private commercial enterprise of its founder, Colonel Richard M. Johnson. Johnson, pioneer landowner in Scott County and hero of the War of 1812, served some thirty years in the United States Congress prior to his election as Vice President under Van Buren. During his long residence in Washington he kept in close touch with Indian affairs and from his strategic position he adroitly directed the business management of the Indian academy to his personal advantage.[1]

A curious set of circumstances determined the origin and location of the Indian school in the bluegrass section of Kentucky in 1819, many decades after the tribal hunting grounds had been transformed into productive plantations. Johnson's pressing indebtedness of some years standing was a paramount factor. In 1819 he was desperately seeking financial relief. Consequently, when in that year the first government money was earmarked for Indian schools, he rightly assumed from his years of experience in Congress and his observation of rising interest in Indian welfare that the federal appropriation of $10,000 would inevitably increase as time passed. His affiliation with the Great Crossings

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Baptist Church near which Choctaw Academy was destined to stand, led him rightly to count on the cooperation of Baptist organizations in providing the missionary supervision of his undertaking in keeping with government requirements. With foresight based on careful analysis and with business acumen he launched the Indian school on his Kentucky plantation and through it successfully channeled much needed money into his yawning coffers.

The opening of Johnson's Indian School, as it was first called, was inauspicious. Eight students arrived from Missouri in the spring of 1819 with the Reverend John Ficklin, a Baptist missionary. The strange little band of "children of the forest" included Lewis Rogers, his wife Maria, and his 7-year-old nephew, Henry Rogers; Franky Craig, a little girl; W. Thompson Suggett and James Suggett, 19 and 15 years of age respectively, and John Ficklin Fish and Paschal Fish, the young sons of Captain Fish of the Shawnees.[2]

The Kentucky Society of Baptists, with government approval, set up a local governing board headed by Johnson's brother, Colonel James Johnson.[3] Johnson, himself, a board member, controlled the finances. The Reverend Thomas Henderson, pastor of the Great Crossings Baptist Church and a board member, was appointed instructor and superintendent.[4] In April 1819 Henderson submitted a budget of $784 to cover the expense of bringing the Indians to Kentucky and to provide them with housing, food and clothing for eight or nine months. In September Johnson received $500, the first of the many payments that were to come to him over a period of more than twenty years.[5]

The financial returns from the school, which was little more than a mission, were negligible. On the other hand the recognition gained by Johnson during the six years of its existence stood him in good stead when he sought the 20-year annuity of $6000 set aside for education in a Choctaw Treaty in 1825. It was this annuity—the first of its kind—that determined the name of Choctaw Academy. Other similar annuities were forthcoming from various tribes that eventually patronized the school. These subsidies came out of the purchase price paid by the government for land abandoned by the Indians when they were removed west of the Mississippi River.

The management of Choctaw Academy with Henderson as the Superintendent and Johnson in control of finances was carried over from the early school. Broadening his scope, Johnson induced the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions to serve as the

supervisory agent. He deemed it unwise, in a letter of December 8, 1825, since he was a member of Congress to use his own name in direct connection with money transactions, and directed Henderson to assume "a prominence in the business" locally.

The government contract allowed $120 for board and instruction, and an additional $80 for clothing and medical care annually for each student.[6] Only boys were enrolled. In the first annual budget, December 8, 1825, Henderson was to receive a salary of $500 and living quarters, $120 was allowed for rental of school buildings, $50 for books, and $5000 for board, clothing, instruction and medical care for the 25 students then enrolled. The remaining $330 was entered as a contingent fund.

From the outset Johnson made his mercenary interest in the Academy clear to Henderson upon whose confidence and loyal support he depended. "All I want," he wrote December 2, 1825, "is a reasonable compensation and that I must have or quit the business. . . . I have no fear but that everything I ask will be accorded me." Ten days later he urged that boarding terms be kept confidential except for a few friends who were aware of his "pecuniary embarrassment." "You know what a disadvantage it would be to me," he cautioned Henderson March 4, 1826, "to have people believe I was making a great deal of money. You will see the propriety of indulging in very little conversation as to terms, prospects, etc." The favorable situation at the end of the first year encouraged Johnson to write June 6, 1826, that the Academy "with the smiles of Heaven may be to our advantage as well as to the advance of the Choctaw Nation."

The financial motive, if uppermost, did not interfere with Johnson's constant aim to develop a school of high standards. His letters were filled with earnest directions concerning many aspects of the Academy. He was a strict disciplinarian. "Use the stern brow or the placid countenance according to merit or demerit," he advised Henderson in March, 1830, "and when students have any complaint let it be made to you and not by dashing coffee or throwing stones at my people." "I thank you over and over again," he wrote a few weeks later, "for your promise to put the hickory on the back of big or little who will not behave themselves in the dining room and inside my yard, or dismiss them in disgrace."

Johnson expressed specific educational views in numerous letters. He advocated letter-writing instead of the use of copy books in penmanship classes. He provided two sets of surveying instruments, and supplied paint boxes and brushes for drawing

and map-making. He equipped the music deartment with flutes, fifes, drums and violins. Music was taught by note and by ear, and singing was popular. Johnson proudly supported the Speaking Society in which even the pre-literate by committing short pieces to memory could take part. He forwarded with earnest comment the religious tracts, Bibles and New Testaments presented by the Bible Society. Murray's Grammar, Pike's Arithmetic and Gibson's Surveying were among the textbooks.

Good public relations were promoted in various ways, such as the exhibition in Washington of creditable classroom work in which letter-writing and map-making were especially featured. Gala affairs lasting from three to five days to display the students' achivements brightened at intervals the school routine and attracted favorable public attention. These occasions ended with a great feast. Johnson was accustomed to announce his frequent visits well in advance so that impressive military drills and musical programs could be arranged to greet him.

Proposals to improve the Academy were neatly dovetailed with plans to increase personal income. To Johnson the two aims were inseparable. He never forgot that growth in enrollment meant more dollars in his pockets. "The more scholars I have, the more profit there will be," he frankly wrote his brother, Major John T. Johnson, December 31, 1825. At the time he anticipated a second Choctaw Treaty that would, he predicted, set aside $40,000 or $50,000 for education. He desired his brother to present the matter to the local board with the request that they recommend to Congress the pending sale of Choctaw lands in Mississipi. The outcome favored Johnson. There were twice as many students in 1827 as in 1826 and Choctaw Academy was on the road to success. "I have embarked my all in this business," he wrote Henderson on September 12, 1827, "and although I make less by three-fourths than any person who has no trial of the matter would suppose, yet having undertaken the affair and being in debt, I want you to stand firm in our interests and the interest of the school and push everything like Washington in the greatest hour of trial and danger."

Johnson's shrewdness in driving close bargains and reducing maintenance costs proportionately increased his income. But it should be said in fairness to him that he vigilantly observed government regulations and whatever profits came his way were legitimate. Limited details in the government contract concerning clothing and food left him free to utilize to his advantage the labor and products of his plantation. Dormitory supplies of

bed ticks, sheets and bolster slips (of linen!), and students' clothing except coats were made in sewing rooms in Johnson's home. Adaline, the daughter of Julia Chinn who was a mulatto slave inherited by Johnson from his father's estate, managed the sewing department with a degree of efficiency that won unstinting praise in many of Johnson's letters. Henderson was often reminded that students should take the best possible care of their outfits and that premiums should reward worthy efforts.

The uniform worn in school was drab when compared with the resplendent garments donned by the young brave on returning to his people after an absence of at least two years. On the list allotted were a pair of cloth pantaloons, suspenders, a fine cloth coat, a vest, a stock as neckdress, a silk pocket handkerchief, high quartered shoes, sox and a fur hat. There was also a pair of new saddle-bags to protect the neat certificate of graduation. A horse was sent from home for the return journey. The one ridden to Kentucky was sold and the money was placed to the credit of the student.

A large portion of the food supplies was produced on Johnson's plantation by slave labor, and perhaps at times by student labor. Concerning the government policy of assigning certain tasks to students, Johnson wrote in June 1828 that the Indian boys "should be made to attend to every drudgery which properly devolves upon them, such as keeping their rooms in good order—also their beds and clothing." Evidently the policy was abused as Johnson warned Henderson on April 29, 1834, "to break up the employment of boys to work for me except in extreme cases, and that on a small scale."

Medical care, apparently adequate, was administered at small expense. Henderson had the responsibility of looking after common complaints and Julia Chinn nursed those with minor illnesses. After her death in 1834 a school physician was engaged, although Johnson had always recommended that a physician attend any student who was dangerously ill. Johnson's and Henderson's care of students during the cholera epidemic in June 1833 is an heroic example of their personal service. Both Johnson and Henderson were severely stricken and nine students succumbed. In the spring of 1834 Johnson wrote that if cholera again threatened the community he would promptly return from Washington but he thought that precautionary measures learned the preceding year would prevent a recurrence of the epidemic in the Academy. The health of the students had been so well guarded that there had been only six previous deaths since 1825.[7]

Salaries were held in check. Henderson waited long and patiently for an increase in his original salary of $500. In March 1838 Johnson ordered the hiring of "common men" with a one-third cut in wages to take care of the workshops. Housing also afforded a profit. Federal aid was granted to erect and equip new structures and Johnson received a rental for his own buildings that served the Academy. In 1834 buildings and equipment were evaluated at $8000, and the Academy had reached the peak of success.

It was in 1834 that the bulk of the Indian population east of the Mississippi River was moved west and the tribes began to insist that schools maintained by treaty annuities be built near them. In that year the Choctaw Nation submitted its first serious criticism of Choctaw Academy to the President. It was charged that "too many boys are crowded together to learn of nights, that the boys forming an Indian community talk Indian and learn English very slowly, and that with few exceptions the boys do not make any progress in learning worth mentioning. . . ." Ominous clouds gathered and Johnson in a state of alarm reported to Henderson on May 12, 1834 that never before had the President been addressed on the subject. "I find," he continued, "that they have attacked your (*sic*) mechanics shops. They say they approve of the workshops but they object to paying $200 for learning the boys to work when they could learn those mechanics professions without paying anything, and if ever the President or Secretary of War should turn their attention to this business, it could not stand the investigation and if such a point were to get into Congress it would blow up the whole school." From now on heated controversy centered around the manual training program which had been introduced by Henderson in 1833. Johnson in his letter of May 12 bitterly denounced the workshops as endangering the very existence of the Academy, but within a few months when the sale of shop production began to yield an unexpected profit he changed his attitude. Thereafter he did all in his power to retain the new program.

The expansion of the Academy's daily schedule to include manual training, then known as mechanic arts, is of sufficient significance to warrant a brief account. The innovation, a landmark in Indian education, was the beginning of the broad vocational training program so vital in government schools for Indians today. It was among the first programs of its kind to be adopted by any school and it was the unique contribution of Choctaw Academy to Indian education. Its origin in Kentucky is one of

the quirks of history. Credit for proposing and developing the program is due Henderson and his assistant Joseph N. Bourassa, a former Academy student. Prior to 1833 the curriculum in Indian schools had been academic with work projects conducted outside of school hours. Henderson's years of experience prompted him in May 1832 to propose workshops for students whose minds turned to work more than books, those with mechanical aptitudes and those wishing to learn a trade.[8] The proposal was ignored in Washington and Bourassa took up the cudgel. With native vividness of expression he suggested to the Indian Office in February 1833 that workshops be added to the Academy "to enable some of the boys that can not learn their books to get a trade. . . . For there are some young men were they to live as long as the man of 969 years and study all the time could not get sufficient learning to teach Indians." It was his opinion that the tribes needed skilled workmen as well as literary leaders.[9] His letter brought immediate action and in September 1833 a shoeshop, two blacksmith shops and a wagon shop were opened at the Academy.

Johnson only partly succeeded in his unrelenting efforts to withstand opposition to the workshops. Attendance dwindled and some of the shops were closed. In February 1836 Johnson insisted that at least the wagonshop be kept open and in this letter he implored Henderson to protect him against unfair accusations.

After Johnson's election as Vice President in 1837 the tide turned momentarily in his favor. He wrote Henderson in December that the Commissioner of Indian Affairs would soon grant authority to keep at least ten boys in each shop and would approve a 10% profit on sales. Encouraged by the prospect Johnson then proposed a store in connection with the shops with Henderson as an "equal partner." He predicted in January 1838 that $1000 could be cleared annually from the store and the shops if they were well managed. Henderson gave his attention to the store and one of his sons distributed the products of the shops in southern markets. But the expanded business program was of short duration. In 1839 the wagon shop was closed and only six boys were working in the other shops. Johnson's intense desire to retain the workshops implies that they yielded a worthwhile profit, the exact amount of which was known probably only to himself and Henderson.

Faced by a decreasing income from the Academy Johnson finally began to admit defeat. He had struggled valiantly but in vain to keep the school open until his indebtedness was wiped

out. In January 1840 he mentioned the eventual closing of Choctaw Academy. In March, still reluctant to yield, he anticipated freedom from debt if the school could run at least two years longer, and in April he entreated Henderson who was on the verge of resigning not to desert him in financial crisis. Then in June when he proposed that the Academy be closed at the end of the next twelve months Henderson agreed to postpone his resignation until the spring of 1841. Henderson was succeeded by P. P. Pitchlynn, a former student of the Academy, who accepted the post on condition that the funds supporting the school be transferred in the near future to a school in the western Indian country. One Mr. Vanderslice succeeded Pitchlynn in March 1842 and no students were enrolled after May of that year.

Johnson's personal aim was in a measure realized. His profits from Choctaw Academy did not cancel his indebtedness but they reduced it sufficiently for him to round out a remarkable career of thirty-odd years in public office of high rank. The overall management of Choctaw Academy whatever its shortcomings, deserves praise. Johnson and Henderson were men of education and ability and they were genuinely interested in the welfare of the students and the Academy's success. They were constantly beset by diverse and vexing problems and it is to their credit that the Academy was not closed earlier.

The aims of Choctaw Academy as an educational institution were also in a measure realized. The school richly contributed to early Indian leadership in the west where the transplanted tribes started life anew. Preacher and teacher, blacksmith and cobbler went forth from its doors. Choctaw Academy was a successful pioneering venture.[10]

FOOTNOTES

[1] See Alice Read (Mrs. Shelley D.) Rouse, "Colonel Dick Johnson's Choctaw Academy: A Forgotten Educational Experiment," *Ohio Archaeological and Historical Quarterly*, 25, January 1916, pp. 88-117; Carolyn Thomas Foreman, "The Choctaw Academy," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 6, December 1928, pp. 453-480, and 9, December 1931, pp. 382-411; Ethel McMillan, "First National Indian School: The Choctaw Academy," *Ibid.*, 28, Spring 1950, pp. 52-62; Leland Winfield Meyer, *Life and Times of Colonel Richard M. Johnson.*

[2] *The Latter Day Luminary*, 1, p. 376. In the Library of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky.

[3] *Ibid.*, 1, p. 377.

[4] The Reverend Thomas Henderson (1781-1846) was born in Virginia and died in Grant County, Kentucky. He married (1) Nancy M. Terrill April 28, 1803 in Virginia, and (2) Hannah McClure (1799-1881) January 16, 1827 in Kentucky. There were nine children by the first marriage and six by the

second. Nancy Ann Henderson (1834-1900), a daughter by the second marriage, married Thomas Rouse and occupied the historic Henderson homestead in Grant County which is still owned by some of their descendants. Emma Rouse, daughter of Nancy Ann and Thomas Rouse, married John Uri Lloyd, distinguished author and scientist of Cincinnati, Ohio. Shelley D. Rouse, a son of Nancy Ann and Thomas Rouse, married Alice Read and resided in Covington, Kentucky. See Emma Rouse Lloyd, *Clasping Hands with Generations Past;* Alice Read (Mrs. Shelley D. Rouse), *The Reads and Their Relatives.* Audubon's portrait of Henderson inscribed "John J. Audubon fecit September 1819—Shippingport, Kentucky" hangs in the Lloyd Library and Museum, Cincinnati, Ohio.

[5] *The Latter Day Luminary,* 1, pp. 409-410; 2, p. 138.

[6] *House Document No.* 109, Serial 384, 26th U. S. Congress, 2nd Session, pp. 1 ff. Library of Congress.

[7] *Annual Report of The Commissioner of Indian Affairs,* "Report of Attending Physician, August 1833," 1833-1834, p. 201.

[8] *House Document No.* 109, *supra,* p. 66.

[9] *Ibid.,* p. 62.

[10] Despite the sustained efforts of countless educators over the many years that lay between the early schools for Indians and the present commendable government program, there are problems in Indian education still only partially solved. See Evelyn C. Adams, *American Indian Education.*