

**RACHEL
CAROLINE
EATON
1869-1938**



**CHEROKEE
EDUCATOR
AND
HISTORIAN**

Few people today have ever heard of Dr. Rachel Eaton. Her story has gone uncelebrated, odd considering how many firsts she accomplished. She is believed to be the first Oklahoma Native American woman to receive a Ph.D., and the first woman county superintendent of schools in Oklahoma.

Rachel Caroline Eaton – known as “Callie” – was born in July 1869 near Flint Creek, Delaware County. Her mother was part Cherokee whose mother walked on the Trail of Tears. She was named for her ancestor Nancy Ward and was related to Sequoyah, author of the Cherokee alphabet.

Callie’s family moved to Claremore in 1874, near Claremore Mound. She graduated from the Cherokee Female Seminary in Park Hill in 1887. During her senior year, the original Female Seminary building burned to the ground. It was rebuilt in Tahlequah, where it stands today. Eaton received her bachelors from Drury College in Springfield, Missouri in 1895. She received her master’s in history in 1911 at the University of Chicago. Her thesis was on John Ross, the Cherokee leader from 1828 to 1866. In 1919, she received her Ph.D. there. Her dissertation, “John Ross and the Cherokee Indians”, was published as a Cherokee history book in 1921. It is still used today for research by Cherokee historians.

Chief John Ross, as chief for forty years, had more to do with the making of Cherokee history than any other man. He was chief for twenty years before the emigration and led the tribe to Indian Territory. Her book chronicled the various steps leading from a simple, contented Indian tribe to a large and powerful tribe having their own government and laws, and a written and spoken language of their own.

Eaton first taught in the Coowescoowee district schools, then at the Cherokee Female Seminary. She married Nowata school principal James Alexander Burns in December 1901, subsequently spending six years at Nowata High School. In the summer of 1905, they returned to the University of Chicago for post-graduate work. The couple was divorced in February 1909.

In 1911, she left Claremore and headed to Mississippi to teach at the State College for Women in Columbus. After spending the summer at the University of Chicago, she led the history department for several years. She taught a year at Lake Erie College in Painesville, Ohio becoming Dean of Women and then head of the history department at Trinity College, Waxahachie, Texas (later in San Antonio) in 1917.

The devastating World War and “Flu Pandemic of 1918-19” had passed and women were about to get the vote due to the 19th Amendment so Eaton announced in April 1920 her candidacy as a Democratic candidate for County Superintendent of Public Instruction of Rogers County. She received the most votes of anyone running in the county, even though it was essentially a Republican year. She served two terms where she gave commencement speeches, administered teacher certification examinations, conducted school visitations, and helped the American Legion leader teach patriotism to students.

Eaton formed the Sequoyah Historical Society in 1908 to help people learn history from the Cherokee perspective. In 1932, the Tulsa Historical Society founded the Rachel Caroline Eaton Chapter in her honor. She was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame in 1936 before dying in Claremore in September 1938 at age 69.

Her final book “The History of the Cherokee Indians” was denied publication as it was regarded as too “pro-Cherokee”. The book remains unpublished. Eaton was very proud of her Cherokee culture, and worked her entire life to promote Cherokee history and education. It is way past time for her to be recognized for her role as a pioneering educator.