

**MARY
SEMPLE
HOTCHKIN**
1836-1917



**FROM
WHEELOCK
AND
BEYOND**

Presbyterian missionaries first served Choctaw people in Mississippi, and traveled with them along the Trail of Tears to Indian Territory. While Choctaws focused on educating their youth, Presbyterian missions concentrated their attention on building schools. The first was Wheelock Academy in Millerton.

Mary Semple was born in Steubenville, Ohio. Her father was a dentist so she enjoyed the luxuries of upper middle class. When she was ten, Dr. John Scudder, a famous medical missionary to India, visited her church, telling the children to write in their Bible: “Mr. Scudder asked me to be a Missionary”. Mary took those words to heart over the years. At age nineteen, while singing a solo in her church choir with the words, “There comes a call and I must go”, she felt it was time for her to go on her own mission.

Through a professor friend at Alleghany Seminary, she learned that Wheelock Academy in Indian Territory was looking for teachers. She was interested, but everyone was discouraging her from going. One evening her brother Will brought over a young doctor friend, who had visited there. He told her how awful life was among the Indians. Mary answered, “Well Doctor Johnson, I never dreamed things were as bad as that. I am more and more convinced that it is my duty to go.”

When Reverend Cyrus Kingsbury of the Choctaw Mission in Indian Territory spoke at a Presbyterian church meeting in Kentucky in 1857, Mary offered herself for mission work. He disparaged her application because she didn’t know how to cook, sew or raise vegetables, telling her of the poor food, isolation, difficult living conditions and difficult Indian languages and vile customs (to him).

Not deterred, she managed to convince him she wasn’t soft, spoiled, or naïve. In 1857 the 19-year-old cultured young society girl traveled by boat down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to Arkansas, then by wagon train to the Choctaw Nation. Wheelock Academy was founded in 1832 by Reverend Alfred Wright and his wife Harriet Bunce. Mary’s arrival caused great consternation among those running the school. How could a delicate teenager who spoke no Choctaw manage a classroom? She surprised them all – by the end of her first year her students spoke English and she spoke fluent Choctaw.

The next year, she was sent to the Bennington Mission Station, established by Reverend Ebenezer Hotchkinn. There she met and married his son Henry in 1860. After he returned from the Civil War, they transferred to a new mission in Caddo and then to Chikika, a very primitive school a hundred miles north of Caddo. Their travels would also lead them to Paul’s Valley and Wynnewood. Henry eventually went back to farming, but died in 1887 of pneumonia. Mary ran the farm until she broke her hip, which wasn’t set properly, and afterwards she walked with crutches.

In 1896 at age sixty, while teaching at a Chickasaw academy, she was asked to run Calvin Institute near Durant. Work was hard as there was very little equipment, only a few desks and seats cut from rough logs. Assisted by her son Ebenezer, the school grew and prospered. By 1900 the school was able to secure a contract, so that Indian boys and girls could attend supported by tribal funds.

A new brick building was built and the name changed to Durant College in 1902 and then Oklahoma Presbyterian College for Girls in 1910. Ebenezer was superintendent of these institutions from 1896 until 1935. The college would later become famous in the 1930s when its girls’ basketball team won 88 consecutive games and two national championships.

During the last three years of her life, Mary worked among the Klamath Indians in Oregon. She died in August 1917 at her home in Stigler. Her marker at the local cemetery is inscribed: “Came to Indian Territory as a Missionary to the Choctaw Indians in 1857”, which understates her importance over forty years as a teacher among the Choctaws and Chickasaws.