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Penelope Johnson Allen: Making History By Saving History

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Historiography

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The mention of European settlement in the Americas conjures images of cultural clash, violent confrontation, and tireless Christianization attempts. The livelihoods of Native American tribes dotting the landscape of North America were abruptly interrupted with the unwelcome arrival of an ambitious new people. The Cherokee Indians dominated the southeast of the United States and upon European confrontation, cultural misunderstandings led to the demise of political relations. After European invasion, life began to change for the Cherokee Indians. Government endorsed assimilation programs began in the early 19th century, characterized by education, labor, and agricultural reform. However, there were anomalies in this generally antipathetic relationship, offering examples of amicable agreements and peaceful cohabitation. Brainerd Mission, located a few miles outside of Chattanooga, Tennessee, opened its doors in 1817 to serve as a mission for the local Cherokee. This mission, whose founding will be discussed at great length, worked tirelessly to civilize the Cherokee until all Native Americans were forced out of the South with the 1838 Indian Removal Act. Almost fifty years after the mission's dissolution, Penelope Johnson Allen was born in Chattanooga. A rare breed of female historian, Penelope dedicated the majority of her life to the memorialization of Brainerd Mission. Combining personal ambition and government funding, Penelope pursued the historical preservation of the mission, as well as all of the people involved, both Christian missionary and Cherokee Indian.

To explain the relationship between white settlers and the Native American tribes near Chattanooga, the Chickamauga and Creek Indians continually cooperated with the forces against the white settlers. Whether supporting the Spanish settlers' ambush of the Cumberland pioneers or aiding the British government in the Revolutionary War, the white opposition could always

find an ally in the local Native American tribe. The years following the Revolutionary War were characterized by staunch conflicts between Native Americans and the white settlers. In 1785, the Treaty of Hopewell was passed by the newly formed United States government to ease tensions with southern Native Americans.¹ Motivated by an intense desire to avoid confrontation, the Treaty of Hopewell prohibited pioneers from settling on Cherokee land and reserved Indian trade regulation to the Federal Government.² Years of conflict between settlers and Indians followed the establishment of the Treaty of Hopewell. George Washington, president at the time, recognized the continuing fragility of the land situation in the western United States and believing that the new U.S. government could not withstand a war against the Spanish-allied Indians, Washington worked intently with Secretary of War Henry Knox to propose a peaceful program to quell Indian resistance. Knox argued that “Indian tribes can have no faith in such imbecile promises, and the lawless whites will ridicule a government which shall, on paper only, make Indian treaties and regulate Indian boundaries,” necessitating an additional treaty.³ On July 2, 1791, the Treaty of Holston was ratified, delineating a new boundary between white and Indian lands, safe settler passage on the Tennessee River, and the dissolution of Cherokee treaties with foreign powers.⁴

This treatise, however, did little to alleviate tensions. Conflicts continued and increased in number until July of 1794. A letter from the Spanish urging the Indians to make peace with American settlers was found on the dead body of Chief Breath after a battle at Nickajack.⁵ It

¹ Treaty of Hopewell (1785).

² Treaty of Hopewell (1785).

³ *American State Papers, Indian Affairs*, I, 53. Accessed in Gilbert E. Govan and James W. Livingood, *The Chattanooga Country 1540-1962*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1952), 42.

⁴ Treaty of Holston (1791).

⁵ *American State Papers, Indian Affairs*, 42.

became apparent that the Cherokee had no choice but to surrender to the assimilation program, ushering in a new era of hesitant Cherokee negotiation with the government. Return J. Meigs, in his time as U.S. Department of War Indian Agent, oversaw a Cherokee Nation consisting of 8,000 Cherokee. In a genealogical entry published in the *Chattanooga Times Magazine*, Penelope Johnson Allen states that Meigs was “of sterling character, devoid of personal ambition, which quickly gained for him the respect and friendship of the Cherokees.”⁶ In one of his 1805 letters, Meigs accurately summarizes the source and continuance of animosity towards the American Indians after the Revolutionary War. Although the letter’s intent was to advocate for appropriating funds and support for Gideon Blackburn’s administration over the soon to be opened Brainerd Mission school, Meigs, on a tangent, reveals the opinion of the majority of white Americans in this time, as well as the government of the United States. One of the major contributors to the strife between the two peoples was that many of the American Indians had fought alongside the British while the United States fought to gain its independence. However, once the war came to an end and the United States emerged as an independent nation, the Native Americans were left “at the mercy” of the government. The government allowed Indians to claim land, but not without chipping away at their culture and forcing them to adopt modern practices.⁷

At a council meeting between Cherokee chiefs and U.S. government officials, including Meigs, they discussed the schools that were going to become available to the Indians. In a typed recollection of the meeting, it is written that one Cherokee chief stated, “You have appeared in our full council. We have listened to what you have said and understand it. We are glad to see you. We wish to have the schools established and hope that they will be of great advantage to the

⁶ Penelope Johnson Allen, *Leaves From the Family Tree*, (Easley: Southern Historical Press, 1982): 180.

⁷ Return J. Meigs correspondence, circa 1805, Penelope Johnson Allen Brainerd Mission correspondence and photographs, Special Collections, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

nation.”⁸ First, it must be acknowledged that is nearly impossible to determine whether or not this Chief can be truthfully cited to have spoken favorably regarding the schools. However, whether or not the Cherokees agreed with the governmental programs, they were left without choice but to comply.⁹

William Crawford, serving as U.S. Secretary of War from 1815-1816, expressed the desires of President James Madison in the construction of the school at Brainerd Mission. The mission was named to commemorate David Brainerd, a New York missionary that spent a significant portion of his life in the Indian field.¹⁰ Very specific instructions were relayed to Cyrus Kingsbury, one of the founders of Brainerd Mission. Crawford wrote of the need for a schoolhouse and a comfortable house for the teacher. Refusing to miss a chance to increase the pervasion of modern culture into the perceived lagging culture of the Cherokee Indians, Crawford explicitly states the need for two ploughs, six hoes, and axes to promote mechanized cultivation to the Cherokee, while also introducing sewing and weaving to the female students. In return for federal funds, Crawford asked that the Brainerd Mission correspond with President Madison, or whoever is in office, once a year to report curriculum developments and reveal any “deviations from that practiced in civilized life”.¹¹

Return J. Meigs, U.S. Department of War Indian Agent, in correspondence with Brainerd Mission proprietor Blackburn, expressed his excitement for the founding of a Cherokee Indian school, believing it to be one of the most favorable ways to continue the “plan of civilization.”

⁸ American Board of Foreign Missions history, undated, Penelope Johnson Allen Brainerd Mission correspondence and photographs, Special Collections, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ William H. Crawford correspondence with Cyrus Kingsbury, 1816 May 14 , Penelope Johnson Allen Brainerd Mission correspondence and photographs, Special Collections, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

On April 9, 1809, Gideon Blackburn, one of the mission's proprietors, received 150 dollars from Meigs at the Department of War and construction began on the new Brainerd Mission.¹²

Throughout this civilizing process made possible by institutions such as the Brainerd Mission, the relationship between the white missionaries and the Cherokee was plagued by cultural misunderstanding. When Brainerd Mission opened in 1817, one of the deepest misunderstandings was that of gender roles. European men viewed Cherokee men as lazy and controlling as they encountered Cherokee women working in the fields and overseeing the agricultural aspect of their colonies. Cherokee women historically planted, harvested, and preserved the food grown in the field. With a similar misinterpretation, the Cherokees witnessed European men working in the fields and believed them to be effeminate.¹³

Additionally, misinterpretations ensued when the Europeans attempted to understand the consensual politics of the Cherokees. When making decisions that could affect the whole tribe, groups or clans could oppose and their verbal opposition was enough to rescind executive decisions. This concept was unfathomable to the white settlers, especially with the respect given to Cherokee women in their political practices. Matrilineal Cherokee society granted unexpectedly egalitarian rights to women. Even after marriage, the woman would remain living at her family compound. While they were living at these compounds, they maintained economic and social resources, even owning individual property.¹⁴ Womanhood was highly regarded in the Cherokee nation and women were the primary owners and administrators of the household.¹⁵

¹² President of Schools in the Cherokee Nation appropriation receipt, 1809 April 9, Penelope Johnson Allen Brainerd Mission correspondence and photographs, Special Collections, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

¹³ Ed. Christie Anne Farnham, *Women of the American South*, (New York: New York University, 1997), p. 48.

¹⁴ Ed. Susanna Delfino and Michele Gillespie, *Neither Lady nor Slave*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

¹⁵ Farnham, 45.

Editor Christie Anne Farnham recalls in her book *Women of the American South* that the settlers credited these practices to the “primitive, heathen nature” of Cherokee society.¹⁶ Cherokee women were given unprecedented political rights and a “measure of control over her own destiny, something European women of the time dared not dream.”¹⁷

On the contrary, American women had little to show for political rights. The American Civil War, had forced temporary autonomy upon women. While the entire country was engaged in the war, women were left at home to fend for themselves and their children. Postwar United States, especially in the South, experienced a surge in women’s empowerment. Years later, World War I ushered in a new wave of confusion. Around the time of Brainerd Mission’s founding in 1817, women replaced men in many necessary jobs, particularly in munitions factories, during World War I. When the war was over, women expected their wartime autonomy to remain the same. As a result, women began demanding social and political rights and women’s rights rose to the forefront of the political discussions.

One Tennessee woman that epitomizes the emergence of politically active women in the early 20th century is Penelope Van Dyke Johnson. She was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee on October 27, 1886. Penelope received her education in Chattanooga Public Schools, beginning with her primary education from the old First District School. She graduated from Chattanooga High School in 1904 and spent a year at Mrs. Starrett’s School in Chicago before attending Western College in Oxford, Ohio.¹⁸ After her father, James Whiteside, died in March of 1908, Penelope moved back to Chattanooga and began teaching at North St. Elmo Elementary School.

¹⁶ Farnham, 48.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Penelope Johnson Allen, *Genealogy of a Branch of the Johnson Family and Connections*, (Kingsport: Kingsport Press, Inc. 1967): 211-213.

She married Samuel Boyd Allen on February 17, 1909 in Knoxville, Tennessee. Two years later, they had their first and only child, Penelope Van Dyke Allen. Penelope and Samuel moved around Tennessee and Virginia periodically until World War I when they moved to Penniman, Virginia so that Penelope could serve as a supervisor at DuPont Shell Loading Plant. Upon the end of World War I, Penelope moved back to Chattanooga and began working for the *Chattanooga News* in 1919 and divorced her husband four years later. Between the years 1933 and 1937, she wrote a column in the *Chattanooga Times Magazine* entitled “Leaves from the Family Tree,” where she began her career as both a historian and genealogist.¹⁹

Although Penelope was born almost 50 years after the closing of the Brainerd Mission, she was incredibly interested in this mission and the people that it served. She began collecting primary documents and correspondence letters with any relevance to the mission. She obtained many of them from Cherokee Chief John Ross’ grandson, Robert Bruce Ross.²⁰ Penelope joined a chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) in 1913. However, that was not her only involvement in local politics and history. She was a member of the National Society of Colonial Dames of America in Tennessee, Chattanooga Area Historical Society, Tennessee Historical Commission, and the Junior League to name a few.²¹ She was also involved in the women’s suffrage movement that demanded the ratification of the 19th Amendment.²²

Throughout her life, Penelope worked tirelessly to preserve the history of Chattanooga. Reverend Silas Emmett Lucas, Jr., who compiled and published a full account of her “Leaves from the Family Tree” weekly columns, states that “much of Tennessee history might have been

¹⁹ Ibid., 213.

²⁰“Penelope Johnson Allen Cherokee Collection 1775-1878.” Nashville: Tennessee State Library and Archives, 1966.

²¹ Allen, *Genealogy*, 213.

²² Allen, *Leaves From the Family Tree*.

lost” without the efforts of Penelope. She worked to create genealogical sketches of families all over the state of Tennessee including the Igou, Meigs, Cleveland, and even her own family. Each article including marital, birth, family, and contextual information dating back sometimes as far as five generations.²³ By 1945, her work had filled over 1,500 volumes.²⁴

In addition to the preservation of historical documents and genealogies, Penelope worked interminably to preserve the memory of Brainerd Mission. She organized a dedication ceremony in March of 1935 and also coordinated the creation of two metal plaques inscribed with the names of the Christian missionaries that worked at Brainerd Mission.²⁵ In addition to her work in preserving the physical existence of Brainerd Mission Cemetery, Penelope advocated for a commemorative stamp to further memorialize the mission. In a 1935 letter written to Senator Kenneth McKellar in protest of the stamp’s lack of approval, Penelope discussed the work of the Christian missionaries at Brainerd Mission. She wanted to memorialize “the unselfish labor of these Christian missionaries among this receptive and progressive Indian tribe.”²⁶ Unfortunately, they were denied their commemorative stamp because it did not reach the postal office’s standards of national significance.²⁷ This, however, did not deter Allen from insuring regional recognition for Brainerd Mission.

To quote Helen Maroon, a Chattanooga local genealogist, Penelope “made history in her own way by saving it for us all.” Recognizing the delicacy of the relationship between the

²³ Allen, *Leaves*.

²⁴ *Ibid*.

²⁵ Brainerd Missionaries dedication ceremony photograph, 1935 March 31, Penelope Johnson Allen Brainerd Mission correspondence and photographs, Special Collections, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

²⁶ Facsimile of Penelope Johnson Allen correspondence with Kenneth McKellar, 1935 January 29, Penelope Johnson Allen Brainerd Mission correspondence and photographs, Special Collections, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

²⁷ Facsimile of Third Assistant Postmaster General correspondence with Mrs. Allen Harris, 1935 March 12, Penelope Johnson Allen Brainerd Mission correspondence and photographs, Special Collections, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Cherokee and the Christian missionaries, she sought to commend the success of the Brainerd Mission. Although the mission was undoubtedly a method of assimilation, the instituted programs were peaceful and useful to make Cherokee lives more successful under the aegis of the United States government. Penelope also commemorated the efforts of the Christian missionaries that worked at the mission. Her contributions were great in number, ranging from new structures, refurbishment, and memorials to both the Christians and the Cherokee. Her personal ambition drove the John Ross chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution to secure the preservation of both the Brainerd Mission Cemetery and countless historical documents. Her collections have contributed significantly to the study of local history, genealogical research, and can be found spread across Tennessee universities and public libraries. Through her preservation efforts, she offered a look into the lives of both Cherokee and Christian missionaries during this period of history and insured that a physical reminder would remain at the original site of the Brainerd Mission.

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