

Cherokee Mission Schools ^[1]

As part of their efforts to spread the gospel of Christ, the Moravians had established missions among the southeastern American Indians in the eighteenth century. Missions were groups of people sent to preach the word of God. Several religious groups established missions in colonial North America, most prominently the Jesuits, the Catholic Society of Jesus.

In 1801, the Salem Moravians established Spring Place Mission in northwest Georgia in the heart of the Cherokee territory. Cherokee youth came at Spring Place to learn to learn the “arts of civilization” — reading and writing, agriculture and women’s handwork, as well as the Christian religion. Many Cherokee leaders sent their children to Spring Place, believing that their best hope for resisting white encroachment on their lands was to create an educated elite who could lead the Cherokee Nation and deal with whites on their own terms. The Moravians who ran the school, well-intentioned though they were, saw the Cherokee as a wild people who needed to be civilized. Some Cherokee were content to accept this kind of civilization if it meant they could keep their land.

In 1833, Georgia citizens – looking ahead to Cherokee removal — forced the school to close. By that time, it had taken in more than a hundred Cherokee children as well as slaves from nearby Cherokee plantations. Spring Place served as a model farm to demonstrate European agricultural techniques, and it also became a model for other missionary work.

This description of Spring Place comes from a 1923 history of Moravian missionary work among the southeastern Indians, written by a Moravian historian. It describes the work of Brother John Gambold, a minister, and Sister Anna Rosina Gambold, a botanist and former headmistress of the Bethlehem Female Seminary, who served at Spring Place from 1805 to 1821.

On September 3, 1819, came the following circular letter sent to all mission schools among the Indians from the War Department and signed by John C. Calhoun, the Secretary:

In order to render the sum of \$10,000 annually appropriated at the last session of Congress for [the civilization of the Indian](#) as extensively beneficial as possible, the President is of an opinion that it ought to be applied in co-operation with the exertions ^[2] of [benevolent associations](#), or individuals, who may choose to devote their time or means, to effect the object contemplated by the act of Congress.

But it will be indispensable, in order to apply any portion of the sum appropriated in the manner proposed, that the plan of education, in addition to reading, writing and arithmetic, should, [in the instruction of the boys, be increased to the practical knowledge of agriculture and such mechanical arts as are suited to the condition of the Indian; and in that of the girls, spinning, weaving and sewing...](#)

It was decided, in 1819, to confine the school, for the time being, to boys only. Experience had shown that it was very difficult to have both sexes at school under the circumstances of living together at Springplace. Later on, it was hoped to start a second, and separate, school for girls only.

The following comment on the mission school among the Cherokees was found with the papers relating to that mission. Its writer was Henry Steinhauer, and it gives a clear insight into what was really going on at Springplace:

The Moravian mission at Springplace, on the borders of Georgia and South Carolina, in the country of the free Cherokee Indians, has now been conducted for some years with unparalleled [perseverance](#) ^[3] by Brother John Gambold, ably assisted by his wife. They have kept school with ten or twelve Indian youths, who have, under their care, attained to a respectable degree of education. Three or four of them give hopes of having attained to a practical knowledge of [the Truth](#) and two, "Buck" and Leonard Hicks, will probably pursue their studies in the mission college in New England with a view to future usefulness among their countrymen.

The [indefatigable](#) ^[4] exertions of Brother Gambold and his wife are almost beyond credit. Besides providing food, [raiment](#) ^[5], shelter and fuel for themselves and their scholars, attending to the school daily, acting as advisers and physicians to the whole neighborhood, entertaining every visitor — and they are numerous who draw on their hospitality — writing letters, and on Sundays teaching, admonishing, etc., they find time, even, to oblige their friends in various ways....

A similar testimony from an entirely different source is the following in the report of Correa de Serra, a Catholic Abbe, on a tour of the United States, who came to Springplace and [abode](#) there for a day and night:

Judge of my surprise, in the midst of the wilderness, to find a botanic garden, not indeed like that at Paris, or yours at Kew; but a botanic garden, containing many exotic and medicinal plants, the professor, Mrs. Gambold, describing them by their [Linnean](#) names. Your missionaries have taught me more of the nature of the manner of promulgating civilization and religion in the early ages by the missionaries from Rome, than all the ponderous volumes which I have read on the subject. I there saw the sons of a Cherokee Regulus learning

their lesson, and reading their New Testament in the morning, and drawing and painting in the afternoon, though to be sure, in a very Cherokee style; and assisting Mrs. Gambold in her household work or Mr. Gambold in planting corn. Precisely so in the forests of Germany or France, a Clovis or a Bertha laid aside their crowns, and studied in the hut of a St. Martin or another missionary.

Abraham Steiner came out to the Cherokee mission for an official visit in October, 1819, remaining at Springplace for six weeks. He wrote back to Salem, among other observations, that he could clearly see the influence the school at Springplace had had on the Cherokee Nation. The training there received by the scholars was reflected in the homes of their parents. In these homes there were well-being, contentment and purity. In addition to their studies, the boys learn to cultivate ^[6] the land and the girls, spinning, weaving, sewing and knitting. More teachers and better equipment are urgent necessities. Regular religious instruction is held, as part of the curriculum, and each Christmas a public examination in Bible and Christian Doctrine takes place and awards are given.

Let us, in spirit, live a day at Springplace. In the morning, when all are up and dressed — in the winter, at daybreak; in summer at sunrise — we meet for family prayer, all kneeling. After breakfast school begins, remaining in session till dinner. Several hours' intermission are followed by school from three o'clock until toward evening. In the hours of intermission the scholars either help in the garden and field, chop wood, etc., or, when no work is pressing, take exercise together; go out with their blow-guns — tubes of cane, 7 or 8 feet in length, fitted with arrows which are blown out — or bows and arrows, to shoot birds and squirrels. After supper is evening-song and prayer and early to bed. Mrs. Gambold does all the teaching except the class for religious instruction which is taught by Mr. Gambold. The school opens and closes with song.

User Tags:

[American Indians](#) ^[7]

[Cherokee Indians](#) ^[8]

[education](#) ^[9]

[history](#) ^[10]

[Moravian](#) ^[11]

[North Carolina](#) ^[12]

[North Carolina History](#) ^[13]

[Page](#) ^[14]

[religion](#) ^[15]

[Students](#) ^[16]

[Teachers](#) ^[17]

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