

Harrell, John ^[1]

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by Richard L. Niswonger, 1988

21 Oct. 1806–8 Dec. 1876

John Harrell, minister, educator, and Methodist ^[2] missionary to the Indian Territory, was born in Perquimans County ^[3]. He was probably the son of John Harrell, the only member of this family listed in the 1800 census of the county. Young Harrell was licensed to preach in 1823 and admitted to the Tennessee Conference six years later. When the Missouri Conference of the Methodist church was unable to supply ministers to the Arkansas District in 1831, Bishop Robert P. Roberts journeyed to the Tennessee Conference at Paris, Tenn., and recruited eight men including Harrell. Harrell ministered on the western border of Arkansas, primarily directing his energies to mission work among newly arrived tribes in the Indian Territory but also establishing and serving as pastor of new churches in Arkansas. In 1832, he created the first circuit among the Cherokee Nation ^[4]. He became Arkansas' first delegate to a General Conference, when he attended sessions at Baltimore in 1836. In the same year he served the Washington County circuit in Arkansas as a pastor and had a part in establishing the First Methodist Church of Fayetteville, Ark. In 1837 the Cherokee and Creek mission work was placed under the Fayetteville District, of which Harrell was presiding elder.

His role as an Arkansas educator apparently began with the appointment as secretary to the Female Academy at Fayetteville in 1837. Later he served on the Board of Visitors for the Far West Seminary of Fayetteville (1844), the first degree-granting institution in Arkansas. His mission work among the newly transplanted tribes in Oklahoma focused on education also. During the fifteen years preceding the Civil War, Harrell had a part in directing the Fort Coffee Academy which served the Northern Choctaws. The Methodist church secured the fort after the army abandoned it to return its forces to Fort Smith. In 1845, one hundred Indian students boarded at the school. A few miles away the church established New Hope Seminary, a boarding school for girls. These schools, founded by two Northern antislavery ministers, were left to Harrell's supervision after the Methodist church divided over the slavery question in 1845. A high school for Creek Indians at Asbury Mission (Eufaula, Okla.) was founded in 1882 and posthumously dedicated to the missionary educator as Harrell Institute.

Before the Civil War ^[5] Harrell helped found numerous Methodist churches in Arkansas, including those at Fayetteville, Van Buren, and Fort Smith. He was pastor of the Little Rock Methodist Church during 1848–49. He held many positions of trust in the church, including that of delegate to the General Conference of 1845 which created the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, presiding elder of the various districts of the Indian Mission Conference, and superintendent of that conference.

Harrell's influence touched Arkansas history at various points. During the Civil War he served one brief term in the state's General Assembly and was elected speaker of the house. Afterwards he spent three years as chaplain in the Confederate Army. When Isaac Parker of Fort Smith, the famous hanging judge, sentenced dozens of men to the gallows, Harrell often prayed with the victims on the scaffold.

His ministry to the Indian Territory began early in his career, but in 1850 he transferred his official connection to the Indian Mission Conference and spent the next twenty-six years in the saddle ministering to mission churches and schools. He won the respect of the Indian peoples and, according to his obituary in *The Van Buren Press*, "was probably better and more generally known in the Indian Territory than any white man" of that era. He died of pneumonia after a brief illness at Vinita, Indian Territory, and was buried at Old Asbury Mission, Eufaula. In 1832, Harrell married Eliza Williams in Washington County, Ark. She died in the same month as he.

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