Letters to “Dear Mother”:
Maternal Imperialism and Cultural Negotiation in Girls’ Letters at the
Mayhew Mission School, 1825-1830

By

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Introduction

In June 1826, a seven year-old Choctaw girl named Susannah Moore wrote a letter to the girls of the Female Bible Society of the Ceylon School, a missionary school run by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in Ceylon. Though this letter was no doubt part of Moore’s education at the Mayhew Mission School in Mississippi, it provides a glimpse into her life as a missionary student and possibly her efforts to reach beyond the confines of her school walls. In penmanship and language quite distinguished for her age, Moore wrote:

Dear unknown friends, Though you are strangers to us we think you would like to receive a letter from your Chakta friends in America in the state of Mississippi. We think those of you who have studied Geography have often seen it on the map. We know nothing about you only what we have read in the Missionary Herald but we should like to commence a correspondence with the girls at Ceylon.¹

Student letters from this early period in Protestant missionary education are rarely if ever discussed in most scholarly accounts of nineteenth century Native American education. While relatively detailed letters like Moore’s are scarce in the ABCFM records, they are valuable for the rich insight they provide into the lives of girls attempting to negotiate two distinct cultures. As neither diary entries nor formal accounts, the writings of the Mayhew students provide evidence of the increased focus on Native American girls’ education in the pre-removal years and the tensions between missionaries and Choctaw groups.

¹ Susannah Moore to the Female Bible Society of the Ceylon School, 24 June 1826, American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions North American Indian mission records, (ABC 18.3-18.8), Houghton Library, Harvard University (hereafter cited as ABCFM), 18.3.4, v. 4, 257.
To fully understand the context of these letters from Mayhew, it is necessary to examine the school progress reports and letters that the girls’ teacher, Anna Burnham, sent to the American Board leaders in New England between 1825 and 1830. Aside from meticulously recording the girls’ spiritual and educational progress, Burnham’s reports and the girls’ letters demonstrate the roots of maternal imperialism within Burnham’s focus on teaching the girls domestic tasks and values. Compared with these reports, the girls’ letters also become clear examples of missionary propaganda, as calls for support for the mission and the use of the girls as “vessels” of Christianity.

More than just serving as agents of propaganda or sponsorship, however, the young authors of these letters experienced cross-cultural interactions, with some girls acting as representatives of their school to members of the American Board and Choctaw community. Although the girls speak through the missionaries’ language, they also often use the language to express their feelings about their current situation, family struggles and acculturation. Clara Sue Kidwell has argued, “since Choctaw women have not left the written records that are the usual stuff of history…the recreation of their lives must rely on descriptions by ethnographers and white, male observers.”² By viewing these mission school letters as written records of Choctaw girls’ lives, we can strive to recreate their lives by using their own words and voices, not just the descriptions of their teacher or ABCFM board members.

Furthermore, analyzing the letters and reports side by side proposes earlier origins than previously recognized for the beginnings of larger gendered assimilation and conversion efforts among Native American missionary educators, and the ways in which

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their attempted “converts” occupied a hybrid space of resistance and negotiation. With the exception of recent studies by literacy scholar Hilary Wyss, most historical analyses of gendered assimilation and Native American students’ writings have concentrated on the later 19th century. Up until the 1980s, scholarship on Native American mission education focused on the actual educational methods and rarely mentioned gender.

Robert Berkhofer published one of the first histories of Protestant missionary-Indian relations in 1965 with *Salvation and the Savage: An Analysis of Protestant Missions and American Indian Response, 1787-1862*, and in 1969 Clifton J. Phillips wrote a book that specifically addressed the American Board of Commissioners’ mission work.3 By the 1970s, scholars like James D. Morrison began to focus on the methods of mission education to the American Indians, as in Morrison’s book *Schools for the Choctaws*.4

The increased interest in scholarship on multiculturalism and women’s studies in the early 1980s encouraged scholars like Robert A. Trennert to publish gendered analyses of Indian boarding schools. Trennert’s article, “Educating Indian Girls at Nonreservation Boarding Schools, 1878-1920,” was the first major work in the field to examine the use of government-run girls’ boarding schools as assimilation tactics. Trennert argued that the girls’ instruction in domestic science was tailored to transform them into “proper middle-class housewives.”5 Trennert focused almost exclusively on the late 1870s and early 1880s, something that has dominated Native American school studies since.

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4 James D. Morrison, *Schools for the Choctaws* (Durant, Okla.: Choctaw Bilingual Education Program, Southeastern Oklahoma State University, 1975).
Several analyses of Native American girls’ education emerged during the early 1990s, as many scholars expanded upon Trennert’s thesis and published research on women reformers, race, and institutionalized, “feminized” education. In her article “Vanishing Americans: Gender, Empire and New Historicism,” Lora Romero argues that the feminization of rhetoric and sentimental fiction in the 1820s and 1830s created a “cult of the Vanishing American,” the idea that the disappearance of Native Americans was inevitable, as well as a reverence for maternal figures in society. Romero’s combination of literary analysis with issues of race and gender would not be matched by similar research until the late 2000s.

Romero’s idea of the feminization of rhetoric, however, encouraged and coincided with the works of other scholars who continued to expand on Trennert’s earlier thesis. Carol Devens’s bleak but compelling article, “‘If We Get the Girls, We Get the Race’: Missionary Education of Native American Girls” (1992) was hugely influential in its use of actual letters from Indian girl students to illustrate the cultural and emotional hardships experienced by the girls in missionary schools. Devens’s choice to analyze Indian girls’ boarding schools, particularly her use of actual girls’ accounts, continued to expand into the 1990s with Devon Mihesuah’s *Cultivating the Rosebuds: The Education of Women at the Cherokee Female Seminary, 1851-1909*. Mihesuah offers a nuanced look at one female school and describes the support of the school by Cherokees “who

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subscribed to the values of white Americans” while simultaneously preserving several of the Cherokee students’ traditions.⁸

Some studies in the 1990s followed Mihesuah’s approach through case studies of specific Native American boarding schools. K. Tsianina Lomawaima’s They Called it Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School challenged previous theses that boarding schools destroyed Indian students’ culture by using interviews with former students to show how the schools’ methods often helped them to reclaim their cultural identities.⁹ By the mid 1990s, more scholars continued publishing on American Indian boarding schools, providing more research on the negative effects of the schools on Indian students. In 1995, for example, David Wallace Adams published Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928, which decried the U.S. government’s systematic destruction of American Indians’ culture through off-reservation boarding schools.¹⁰

Once again focusing on the post-1880 years, a host of scholarship on Indian schools followed Adams’s book into the late 1990s and 2000s.¹¹ Child’s Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900-1940 (2000) returned to the model created by Devon Mihesuah and Carol Devens in using letters from American Indian families to their children at school. Child assigned much more agency to American Indian students

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⁸ Devon A. Mihesuah, Cultivating the Rosebuds: The Education of Women at the Cherokee Female Seminary, 1851-1909 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 82.
⁹ K. Tsianina Lomawaima, They Called it Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994).
and their families than previous scholarship had, however.\textsuperscript{12} Around this time, scholars began to analyze the importance of letter writing and literacy in 19\textsuperscript{th} century schools, and literary scholar Hilary Wyss published work specifically on American Indians and letter writing.\textsuperscript{13} Although Wyss’s later anthology \textit{Early Native Literacies in New England} focuses on encounters between natives and whites in 17\textsuperscript{th} and 18\textsuperscript{th} century New England, it reinitiates research on American Indian girls claiming some form of agency through their writings to school administrators. In a similar vein, Amy Goodburn’s article, “Girls’ Literacy in the Progressive Era: Female and American Indian Identity at the Genoa Indian School” (2003) argues that the American Indian girls attending a 19\textsuperscript{th} century federal boarding school used the era’s emphasis on literacy and writing to resist the dominant new ideologies they were being taught.\textsuperscript{14}

These more recent works push for what Margaret Jacobs calls “a complex portrait of the schools and Indian families’ experiences of them that emphasizes Native agency” rather than total victimization by government forces.\textsuperscript{15} Since 1980 however, a number of scholars have published works that affirm Native agency in historical studies, beginning with the publication of Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller’s influential article, “The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West.” Jensen and Miller’s work was one of the first to truly question the lack of research


\textsuperscript{13} Hilary E. Wyss, \textit{Writing Indians: Literacy, Christianity, and Native Community in Early America} (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000); Kristina Bross and Hilary E. Wyss, eds., \textit{Early Native Literacies in New England: A Documentary and Critical Anthology} (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008).


on western women of other races and cultures and to identify the many sources available for research on non-Euro American women.16 The scholarship following Jensen and Miller’s article sought, with mixed results, to illuminate these connections and interactions between “westering women” and American Indian women. Glenda Riley’s book, *Women and Indians on the Frontier 1825-1915* (1984), used women’s letters and diary entries to argue for more complex, often transformative relationships between white women and American Indian women.17

In several ways, however, this body of work still failed to fully expand upon the lives of American Indian women as independent studies of research in their own right, something Elizabeth Jameson would argue for in her 1988 article “Toward a Multicultural History of Women in the Western United States.” Jameson critiques previous work on western women for its subjugation of women of different cultural or racial backgrounds to nameless characters within white women’s history.18 According to Jameson, American Indian women have traditionally been portrayed as “subordinate in marriage and in work relationships and as degraded beasts of burden,” in western studies; but that scholars could take on new angles if they would only know that “women chose among a variety of roles in Indian culture.”19 For Jameson, this isn’t just about a broader knowledge of women’s roles, but about asking new historical questions.

The call for reform in western women’s history, further emphasized by Antonia Castañeda’s article “Women of Color and the Rewriting of Western History” and Carol

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19 Ibid, 768.
Devens’s *Countering Colonization: Native American Women and Great Lakes Missions, 1630-1900*, both published in 1992, ushered in new threads of discussion within the field, mostly notably on women moral reformers, race and gender.\(^{20}\) Peggy Pascoe’s benchmark study, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874-1939* expanded upon research on the rise of women reformers in the 19\(^{th}\) and early 20\(^{th}\) century and was one of the first to link the reformers and the women they helped with social control, the effects of intercultural relations and the concept of maternal imperialism.\(^{21}\)

Within studies on American Indian women and culture change, Theda Perdue, Devon Mihesuah and Clara Sue Kidwell are some of the most notable names. Perdue’s studies on Cherokee women during the early 19\(^{th}\) century provided a much-needed analysis into the lives and agencies of American Indian women pre- and post-removal.\(^{22}\) Mihesuah’s article “Too Dark to Be Angels: The Class System Among the Cherokees at The Female Seminary” was one of the first to deeply analyze the class and racial conflict among Cherokees; while Kidwell also filled a gap in the research on Choctaw women with her article “Choctaw Women and Cultural Persistence in Mississippi,” (1995) and book, *Choctaws and Missionaries in Mississippi, 1818-1918*.\(^{23}\) The former by Kidwell in particular argued for Choctaw women’s crucial roles as “custodians of traditional cultural


The article’s inclusion in an anthology of similar work on Native American women coincided with a boom in other anthologies on Western women during the late 1990s.

Elizabeth Jameson and Susan Armitage’s *Writing the Range: Race, Class, and Culture in the Women’s West* (1997) features articles that examined Native American women’s resistance to authority and “moral rescue,” while Karen Anderson expands upon the idea of maternal imperialism and race in her article “Changing Woman: Maternalist Politics and “Racial Rehabilitation” in the U.S. West,” in a 1999 anthology, *Over the Edge: Remapping the American West.* Anderson’s article also reflected a growing re-interest in the idea of white women and U.S. empire, as seen in Amy Kaplan’s article “Manifest Domesticity” (1998). Kaplan analyzes the double meaning of “domesticity” in antebellum America in terms of the U.S. as nation and in using white women’s “moral influence” as a tool in Manifest Destiny-era “civilization” of the west.

Although Kaplan’s article was influential in the field, by the late 1990s some scholars still noted the lack of research that successfully combined studies on conquest and colonization, the role of domestic imperialism and gender roles among American Indian and white women. Ann Laura Stoler’s 2001 article, “Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies,”

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encourages scholars to examine colonial studies across borders through the idea of “‘the intimate frontiers’ of empire.” Citing Stoler’s article, Margaret D. Jacobs presented a paper in 2005 that emphasized this need to examine white women “as potential agents of colonial control in North America” within the intimate sphere of the home. Intended as more of a “call to researchers” than an analysis, Jacobs suggested areas of possible study – including one most pertinent to my research, the reasons behind teaching domestic skills to American Indian girls. Jacobs’s subsequent article, “Maternal Colonialism: White Women and Indigenous Child Removal in the American West and Australia, 1880-1940” (2005) returns to Stoler’s other main point of placing white women’s imperialism within a larger global story of gender, race and indigenous child removal. She does point out however that by focusing on white women’s role in child removal, she cannot “do justice to indigenous women’s experiences of removal.”

A few scholars followed Jacobs’s lead with examinations of female missionaries in other countries; while others continued Stoler and Jacobs’s research into colonial intimacies and gendered assimilation, as with Katherine Osburn’s "How Did White Women Reformers with the Southern Utes Respond to Gendered Assimilationist Indian Policies?" (2004). Some studies have focused on continuing to incorporate more American Indian women’s stories into the history record, while new anthologies continue to offer guides to researching and analyzing Native women and Protestant missionaries in

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31 Jacobs, 457.
the context of American empire. In the anthology *Competing Kingdoms: Women, Mission, Nation, and the American Protestant Empire, 1812-1960*, Betty Ann Bergland writes about the “central ambiguity” of the relationships between Norwegian missionary teachers and Indian students at the Bethany Indian Mission.

Among these historiographies, the most notable gaps in scholarship pertain to girls’ mission schools among the Choctaw, as well as Choctaw education in the pre-removal years, the time period before which most historians analyze missionary-Indian relations and the “roots” of U.S. domestic imperialism. There are logical reasons for this, too: a wealth of documentation exists on American Indian boarding schools and policies from the late 19th century west and early New England. The late 19th century was also a significant time period, with the institutionalization of boarding schools, increased emphasis on assimilation, and the rise of female moral reform movements. The other most notable gap of research is on letter writing and the voices of early American Indian students prior to the rise of institutionalized schooling. These themes have been discussed in books on later Indian education, particularly using letters from later students like Zitkala-sa, but rarely during this earlier time.

My thesis seeks to amend these gaps by discussing the mid-1820s in Mississippi, during the very beginnings of aggressive missionary work to the southwestern Indians and the recruitment of girl students as a form of cultural assimilation. I will show that the origins of maternal imperialism and gendered assimilation date further back than

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35 Devens, “‘If We Get the Girls, We Get the Race’: Missionary Education of Native American Girls,” 219.
previously assumed and that valuable insights on agency and cultural negotiation can be gleaned from Choctaw girls’ school letters from this earlier period.

I begin in Chapter 1 by providing context on the Mayhew school reports and letters through an historical overview of the relationship between the Choctaw and the American Board missionaries, their different stances on education, and the foundation of the Mayhew School. I then take a look at the competing ideologies of motherhood among Choctaw and missionary women through a discussion of Anna Burnham’s background, the contradictions of maternal imperialism and Choctaw gender roles. Through this cultural and historical lens, in Chapter 2 I explore the letters written by the Mayhew students, and the ways in which we can read their negotiations of their biculturalism, their personal struggles and their methods of reclaiming agency in a rapidly changing, often harsh environment.
Chapter I

Choctaws and Missionaries in 1820s Mississippi

In 1822, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) opened their second mission school among the Choctaw Nation in Mississippi. The Choctaw leaders encouraged this, and indeed put pressure upon the missionaries to live up to their earlier promise of educating their children. The missionaries chose to call the new mission Mayhew, after an early New England missionary. Mayhew was built up along the Oak-tib-be-ha Creek on one hundred acres of prairie, about thirteen miles from the Tombigbee River in eastern Mississippi.\(^{36}\) This location was chosen mainly because of its proximity to the river and easy access to shipments from the East, as well as its nearness to white settlements east of lands ceded by the Choctaw in 1816.

The missionaries’ original plan was to build a larger boarding school for the Choctaw children, but lack of finances and increased pressure to build more schools forced them to settle for a day school. Mayhew’s first class brought in around 12 students: 8 Choctaw and 4 missionary children, and shortly after this, separate boys’ and girls’ schools were created.\(^{37}\) The establishment of a girls’ school was in line with the rising mid-century belief that women “must be educated in order to raise virtuous male citizens,” something that the missionaries supported.\(^{38}\)

Although Mayhew was one of the first mission schools in that part of Choctaw territory, the creation of the school was just one of many products of interaction between

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\(^{36}\) Clara Sue Kidwell, *Choctaws and Missionaries in Mississippi, 1818-1918* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 51. According to an ABCFM report from 1827, Mayhew was 90 miles east of Elliot Station and 25 miles west of the Mississippi-Alabama border (ABCFM report 1827, 113)

\(^{37}\) Kidwell, 57.

\(^{38}\) Devens, 224.
Choctaw and Anglo-American settlers. One scholar remarked that the Choctaw’s southeastern homeland “has been subject to the longest historical impact of European exploration and colonization of any part of the country,” and by 1822 the Choctaw’s governing systems had undergone several transformations as they learned to resist and negotiate further encroachment by the federal government and missionaries.\(^{39}\) The first few years of the nineteenth century brought some of the most crucial changes to the lives of the Choctaw. Their growing cession of lands to the federal government and increasing dependence on European trade goods like cloth altered their subsistence patterns.

Traditionally, Choctaw men hunted while Choctaw women farmed, tended to gardens and occasionally accompanied men on their hunts. They depended on domesticated plants like corn and traded meat with other tribes. By the late eighteenth century, the Choctaw involvement in trading cloth encouraged women to weave and knit for trade; trading deer skins became more important than meat; and the European introduction of cattle into the southeast changed Choctaw men’s roles from hunters into cattle herders.\(^{40}\)

The changes to the land also began to shift traditional Choctaw clan and village structure, as more Choctaw groups moved from a central location to their own plots of land. Clan changes were not just limited to land and population, but also to blood and kinship ties. Women were central to Choctaw culture and society: iksas, or moiety/kinship lines as well as political power still descended from the mother. Sons were taught by their maternal uncles, and women and men were still relatively equal in

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\(^{40}\) Ibid.
economic matters and council meetings.\footnote{Michelene E. Pesantubbee, “Beyond Domesticity: Choctaw Women Negotiating the Tension between Choctaw Culture and Protestantism,” in Native Women’s History in Eastern North America before 1900: A Guide to Research and Writing, ed. Rebecca Kugel (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 439.} This power structure began to shift, though not completely erode, by the early nineteenth century. White traders who arrived to Mississippi in the eighteenth century often married Choctaw women, their unions producing “half-blood” or “mixed-blood” children (as they were referred to throughout the nineteenth century)\footnote{I continue to use these terms, always in quotation marks, throughout my text when referring to physiology. I use them in large part because they appear frequently throughout Anna Burnham’s reports and letters as ways to distinguish the students. I have tried to only use them within their appropriate historical context.}\footnote{Kidwell, 120.} Some of these “mixed-blood” sons would use their family connections to rise to the top of Choctaw society, and many embraced the move towards a more patriarchal structure brought on by Europeans. By the 1820s, surnames like Folsom, Leflore, Pitchlynn, Perry, Nail and Juzan, all of “mixed-blood” families, were well known in Mississippi.\footnote{Kidwell, 120.} Men like David Folsom, son of a white trader and his Choctaw wife, were crucial in changing the structure of Choctaw life, dealing with the government and mediating between the Choctaw and the missionaries.\footnote{Clara Sue Kidwell, Choctaws and Missionaries in Mississippi, 1818-1918 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 18.}

It was into this changing environment that the ABCFM missionaries arrived. The ABCFM was established in 1810 as an “interdenominational organization of Presbyterians and Congregationalists” by members of the Congregational Church in Massachusetts.\footnote{Ibid, 24.} Spurred on by the government and a sense of nationalism after the War of 1812, more settlers moved onto Choctaw land – what would become “settler colonialism” – and the missionaries felt that it was their duty to incorporate the Indians into American, Christian life. The ABCFM was certainly not alone in their endeavors,
with members of the Missionary Society of the American Methodist Episcopal Church and other Presbyterian missions also coming to Mississippi during this time.\footnote{Carol Devens, \textit{White Mother to a Dark Race: Settler Colonialism, Maternalism, and the Removal of Indigenous Children in the American West and Australia, 1880-1940} (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 4.}

In 1817 the ABCFM sent missionary Cyrus Kingsbury to establish a mission among the Cherokee at Brainerd, Tennessee.\footnote{Dianna Everett, “American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions,” \textit{Oklahoma Historical Society’s Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture}, 2007. Retrieved from http://digital.library.okstate.edu/encyclopedia/entries/A/AM002.html.} The ABCFM’s goal in establishing schools among the Cherokee was to instruct “the rising generation in common school learning, in the useful arts of life and in Christianity, so as gradually to make the whole tribe English in their language, civilized in their habits and Christian in their religion.”\footnote{David H. DeJong, \textit{Promises of the Past: A History of Indian Education in the United States} (Golden, Colorado: North American Press, 1993), 65.} The missionaries’ efforts coincided with the Civilization Act, passed by Congress in 1819, which allotted $10,000 for Native American education to prevent “the further decline and final extinction of the Indian tribes.”\footnote{Kidwell, \textit{Choctaws and Missionaries}, 35.} The Treaty of Doak’s Stand in 1820 was another example of the ways in which Choctaws were continually forced to renegotiate their land with the government. With this treaty they ceded six million acres in the western Choctaw Nation in exchange for land in Arkansas; those who stayed in the ceded territory would be given plots of land and money for schools in which to educate their children, thus becoming “civilized.” Those who stayed, however, also had to contend with the increasing arrivals of white settlers.\footnote{Ibid, 49.}

The Treaty encouraged missionary work; although it stipulated education, not religion, for the Choctaw, the missionaries saw an opening to provide moral education to the tribe. While Kingsbury remarked of the Choctaw, “We are decidedly of the opinion...
that, in every point of view, it is important that they should learn to help themselves.\textsuperscript{51} The ultimate goal of the missionaries became to rescue the Choctaw from what the missionaries regarded as “destruction by the inexorable march of Anglo-American progress.”\textsuperscript{52} Their initial intentions differed from the federal government’s, and yet as time went on their goals and actions became more aligned. The Choctaw valued “personal freedom and autonomy” with every individual able to “seek spiritual power,” and as such were not interested in the religion that the missionaries encouraged, with its themes of subjugation and the absolute power of God.\textsuperscript{53} Choctaw leaders wanted schools and placed an emphasis on “formal education in the white man’s way” as a method of survival and of elevating the status of their children.\textsuperscript{54}

A prime example of these differing goals was the collaboration between missionaries Cyrus Byington and Alfred Wright with Choctaw leader David Folsom to translate biblical texts into a written Choctaw language. The missionaries saw this as essential to teaching the Choctaw the Gospel, “an instrument of salvation,” while Folsom and his Council saw it “as a way to introduce laws” among the people.\textsuperscript{55} Despite these separate goals, the Choctaw utilized the missionaries’ presence to demand education and in a Council meeting on June 3, 1820, Choctaw regional chief Pushmataha agreed that they would give the missionaries the balance of their annuity from the 1816 U.S. land cession to build the first schools, “solely for the benefit of the Choctaws.”\textsuperscript{56} This agreement was

\textsuperscript{51} Kidwell, \textit{Choctaws and Missionaries}, 66.
\textsuperscript{52} Devens, 222.
\textsuperscript{53} Kidwell, 28.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{55} Kidwell, “Choctaw Women and Cultural Persistence,” 122.
\textsuperscript{56} “The balance of the annuity due to the said District from the United States for the purchase of land in the year of our Lord 1816 made by Gen Coffee [etc] of $2000 per annum for 16 years…shall be appropriated for the benefit of the school at Elliot…for the education of Choctaw children.” Choctaw Indians, Council Decision to Support Schools, 3 June 1820, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 2, 62.
later expanded in 1823 to grant the missionaries “the privilege of establishing mechanical shops, cultivating land and keeping stock for the benefit of the school”; to allow mission teachers to board free of charge; and to pay for the board of “two, three or more poor scholars at each of the schools.”

Both the missionaries and Choctaw hoped that Mayhew’s school would be more successful than their first establishment at Elliot Mission. Mayhew’s location was far from major areas of Choctaw settlement and community life, however, something that physically isolated the missionaries from the majority of the Choctaw population. From the beginning of Mayhew’s establishment, the missionaries also mostly interacted with only mixed-blood leaders; they were often welcomed first to the country by the Folsom or Pitchlynn men. The missionaries’ alliance with mixed-blood leaders coupled with existing tensions between mixed-blood leaders who tended to side with the government and the more traditional Choctaws only isolated the missionaries further from a large segment of the Choctaw people.

Resistance to the missionaries at Mayhew was not just limited to traditional or “full-blood” Choctaw, however, and a few years after Mayhew’s establishment, a few Choctaw expressed their unhappiness with the mission by removing their children or shutting other nearby schools entirely. Captain Cole, a “half-blood” Choctaw and speaker for his district, frequently expressed disapproval of the missionaries, more than once removing his nephew and niece from both Elliot and Mayhew schools. In 1824 and 1825, the U.S. War Department addressed the “Choctaw Delegation, Friends and Brothers” to warn them against any interference with control of the mission schools. J.C.

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57 Choctaw Indians, agreement within re-erection of schools, 12 May 1823, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 2, 100.
58 Kidwell, Choctaws and Missionaries in Mississippi, 29.
59 Captain Cole Petition, 6 June 1821, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 2, 83.
Calhoun of the War Department warned, “no interference of the kind be again attempted in any school which may be established at your request,” and assured the Choctaw representatives that “You must be sensible that the Government has no object, other than that which relates to your own good.” The address of the War Department to the Choctaw Chiefs in 1825 warned them, “If you will drink and quarrel and make it impossible for these good people to carry on their plan of education, you must bear the evil of your own doings.” In the eyes of both the missionaries and government officials, Choctaw schools were benevolent works, a “creative rather than destructive process that made new Christian citizens out of savages.”

In spite of the resistance from Choctaw districts, several Choctaw leaders continued to support Mayhew and frequently attended school examinations, such as those recorded in July 1826 and 1829. The attendance of Choctaw leaders at examinations in particular show that while the Choctaw leadership’s involvement in the schools gave them a much higher sense of autonomy, it also placed their children in a unique and often difficult position. The children were expected to excel academically at school, all while undergoing separation from their families and a break in their traditions. Some missionaries hoped that the scholars would “become teachers and diffuse the advantages of instruction through the whole nation,” while the schools would contribute to “producing a speedy change in the character and condition of this people.”

60 J.C. Calhoun to the Choctaw Delegation, December 3, 1824, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4, 252.
61 McKenney to Choctaw Nation, January 7, 1826, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4, 259.
62 Devens, 223.
64 Ibid.
missionaries and Choctaw leaders had different goals regarding the education of their children, but both placed great hopes on what this education would bring.

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While male leaders among both the Choctaw and American Board communities controlled many aspects of the governance of Mayhew, it was the women who truly experienced first hand the changes and tensions that arose from interactions between the Choctaw and missionaries. The success of the Mayhew Girls’ School revolved around educating Choctaw girls to be pious, industrious Christian women. This education depended on the establishment of a strong maternal influence in the form of their teacher, Anna Burnham, and as such, was quite often met with resistance from many of the girls’ Choctaw mothers. While the girls’ education stemmed from the missionaries’ acknowledgment of the centrality of women in Choctaw culture, teachers like Burnham invalidated Choctaw women’s influence by essentially dismissing anything that was not in line with the ideals of Protestant, Republican Motherhood. These contradictions complicated the relations of the Choctaw girls with their school community and their families at home.

Documentation on any of the early female missionaries to the Choctaw is scarce, but what we do know gives us an idea of the kind of religious and cultural background Burnham brought with her to Mayhew. Born in 1781 in Lenox, Massachusetts, Burnham would have been in her early 40s when she arrived at Mayhew in 1822. As a middle-aged, unmarried woman, Burnham had few options, but missionary teaching, though challenging and potentially dangerous, would have provided some rewards. Being single,

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65 Anna Burnham Papers, Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Retrieved from http://discover.ODAI.yale.edu/ydc/Record/3601674/Description.
though perhaps economically unstable, would also have given Burnham somewhat more autonomy. Burnham was not the only missionary woman at Mayhew, as the main male missionaries Alfred Wright, Cyrus Kingsbury, Cyrus Byington and William Hooper all brought their wives with them or married shortly after arriving in Mississippi.\(^6^6\) Clara Sue Kidwell notes, however, that missionary wives died frequently, usually after childbirth but also from illnesses and simply being overworked in harsh conditions.\(^6^7\) At the Mayhew Mission School, Burnham had support from various men throughout the years, four of whom served as teachers, mechanics and farmers. Burnham also had some outside female help as well, especially during her frequent absences from the school in the late 1820s.\(^6^8\)

As a native New Englander, Burnham was likely familiar with the missionary groups who formed in Boston and Connecticut and made their way southwest to preach to the Choctaw. She might also have been part of the new movement of teachers spurred on by educator Horace Mann in the 1820s to establish “common schools” in the “uncivilized” west, and encouraged by Catharine Beecher in her schools for girls.\(^6^9\) Judging from Burnham’s school reports, she would have agreed with Beecher’s view that common schools were “an extension of the church” and places to teach religious and moral values. This educational movement coincided with a larger evangelical feeling in the country and a rise of specific new duties for women that “justified their public


\(^{67}\) Kidwell, *Choctaws and Missionaries in Mississippi*, 79.

\(^{68}\) Two female teachers, Miss Hannah Cone and Mrs. Stewart (Eliza Capen) assisting at Mayhew during Burnham’s absence. American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Mission Among the Choctaws, Mayhew, 19\(^{th}\) Annual Report of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, October 1828), 80. Retrieved from Google Books.

activism by invoking their traditional roles or potential capabilities as mothers,”
sometimes called “maternalism” and which would influence the late-nineteenth century
idea of “women’s work for women.”  

While “maternalism” upheld the sacredness of motherhood and being proper
women, it often “served to further colonial aims by eroding indigenous women’s
authority.”  

Burnham’s promotion of sacred motherhood is ironic in that while she
herself did not have children or hold the same influence as Choctaw women within their
community, she clearly viewed her role as surrogate school-mother to the girls as more
important for their education and well-being. Missionaries often misunderstood Choctaw
women’s roles as farmers as signs of “drudgery” and mistreatment by their husbands. As
early as 1755 Choctaw women were described as “slaves to their husbands” because they
worked the land and did all of the housework. The continuation of Choctaw polygamy
also contributed to the missionaries’ disapproval of traditional Choctaw life (although
several white men would take multiple Choctaw wives). Against the nineteenth century
values of “true womanhood – piety, domesticity, submissiveness, and purity,” which
separated women’s activities into their own domestic sphere, Choctaw women were
viewed as ill-fit mothers, unable to teach their daughters “the routines of female
domicity.”

On the contrary, Choctaw women had an important status among their people and
were crucial to Choctaw survival, as their culture “depended upon reciprocal

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70 Margaret Jacobs, “Maternal Colonialism: White Women and Indigenous Child Removal in the American
West and Australia, 1880-1940,” Faculty Publications, Department of History, University of Nebraska-
71 Ibid, 465.
72 Devens, 228.
relationships” and both women and men contributed to work. Choctaw kinship ties, connected through the mother, “bound villages and divisions of the Choctaw nation together,” and placed women in the position to determine “standards of male behavior.” Furthermore, by marrying Choctaw women, white men learned of traditional power structures through their wives. Throughout the 1820s, Choctaw women retained aspects of their shared power structures and learned to capitalize on new trade commodities and market shifts. In 1826, a new constitution divided the property of a deceased man among his widow and children – thereby giving land power to the man instead of the woman – but Choctaw matrilineal structure and maternal influence persisted.

It was in the removal of their children to day schools taught by whites that Choctaw women began to lose power in their communities. Mixed-blood children especially, though culturally raised as Choctaw, were expected to be educated in “the white man’s way,” and many Choctaw women looked to this new education not only as a way of survival but also to gain political status. Many Choctaw women were reluctant to give up their strong bonds with their daughters, however, particularly as they learned of the ways in which their daughters were being taught. At mission schools, Choctaw girls were given new, Anglo names and new clothes; they were “trained to become the archetypes of southern true womanhood” and were taught by the missionaries that many of their customs were “immoral.”

Although the missionaries took issue with what they perceived to be the ill treatment of Choctaw women and the impropriety of their children’s upbringing, they

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73 Pesantubbee, 440.
75 Ibid, 123.
76 Ibid, 121.
77 Pesantubbee, 439.
understood enough of the Choctaw gender structure to know the centrality of women to the Nation. By educating Choctaw girls in domestic tasks and religion, the missionaries’ hope was that the girls would spread their new beliefs to their people. In doing so, they would also ideally pass on the value of domesticity, thus relieving their mothers of their perceived “drudgery.” An early report from the nearby Elliot Mission School affirmed this strategy by noting that, “The education of females is considered of primary importance as it respects the prospective education of children and the progress of civilization.”78 This statement preceded missionary Isaac Baird’s infamous declaration in 1883 that Indian girls needed schooling because they would “wield a greater influence in the future. If we get the girls, we get the race.”79

Mayhew became what Ann Laura Stoler describes as a “microenvironment” created to “carry out public policy on race,” even if early missionaries did not see it as such.80 They saw their goal as one of benevolence, and that conversion and civilization were the Native Americans’ only chances to avoid total extermination by the government. Their “benevolent” missions did not prevent the missionaries from outwardly expressing a “language of empire” in their teachings, particularly within the schoolhouse.81 For teachers like Burnham, cultural imperialism was a part of her daily lessons to her students – even if her mission was one of religion and morality, she was contributing to the government’s plan of “Americanizing the foreign within the domestic space of the nation.”82

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78 Report on the Elliot Mission School, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v.1, 73.
79 Devens, 225.
80 Stoler, 22.
82 Betty Ann Bergland, Competing Kingdoms, 171.
Annual school reports and letters kept by Burnham and sent to American Board officials clearly detail the ways in which Burnham marked this progress in her students. The American Board then used Burnham’s records to chart the civilization of the whole Choctaw Nation. Burnham’s reports are some of the most detailed pre-removal documents in the early ABCFM collection, and are even more significant since they are one of the few collections authored by a woman within a male-dominated organization. Burnham’s meticulous reports demonstrate the seriousness of the mission efforts, her goals as a teacher and the ways in which she measured the success of her school. Her notes of concern or praise for her pupils reveal her role as an in-school surrogate mother as well as the standards of a white, most likely middle-class Protestant woman from the East. Most significantly, Burnham’s reports provide a glimpse into the reality of the mission school, its struggles and responses to it, all of which were often glossed over by official missionary publications and letters written by Burnham’s students.

Burnham’s reports are fairly uniform in structure, usually beginning with an opening letter and then listing the girls by age, “pedigree” (Burnham’s term for whether the students were full, half, or one-quarter Choctaw), and when they arrived at the school. This section is then followed by detailed notes on the progress of each class level, of which there were usually six with varying numbers of students in each. Burnham’s report from July 1, 1825 reported on all stages of her students, noting that Anna Homer, from the 3rd class, “began the letters and could not speak English,” while the 4th class “read some in the New Testament last term…and for some time have done reading lesson once a day in the Pious Stranger (they need some suitable books of easy reading).”  

83 Anna Burnham, Choctaw Missions, Report of Mayhew Girls’ School, July 1, 1825, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4. The Pious Stranger appears to have been a devotional and instructional booklet published in 1822 in
all of the girls’ reading material revolved around religious instruction, devotionals, or stories of successful Native religious converts. This report also had a practical purpose as Burnham recorded the annual number of scholars and their reasons for absences. In 1825 she noted 37 scholars with 12 absent, and in 1826, 28 “natives,” 6 mission children, and 13 who did not return.

In addition to discussing the religious education the students received, Burnham also used her reports to make remarks to the American Board back East – particularly in regards to her constant lack of supplies. Along with reading lessons in the Bible and other religious readings, the students practiced defining their words from the Dictionary, studied Geography extensively, having “committed all to Boundaries of the U States – Capitals – most of the Rivers – soil – climate – productions – and character of the inhabitants,” and worked on their multiplication tables.\(^{84}\) Despite this rather typical 19th century education, Burnham makes it clear in each report what the ultimate goal is – to teach the children scripture, whether by having them read and write scripture in Choctaw or English.\(^{85}\) This goal becomes especially apparent through the girls’ letters, which are often filled with religious, gender-neutral language.

Teaching the girls proper comportment and ideals of “true womanhood” were almost as highly prioritized as their religious lessons. Although both the boys’ and girls’ schools at Mayhew taught the children vocational skills, the boys’ education often focused more on language, arithmetic and ciphering, skills that both the missionaries and government officials felt were more appropriate in white professions. The girls, by

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84 Anna Burnham, Choctaw Missions, Report of Mayhew Girls’ School, 1826, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4, 293.
85 Ibid.
contrast, learned tasks that prepared them to manage their own home, or more likely for several girls, to perform domestic labor in other people’s homes. Indeed, with a lack of finances and extra hands at the mission, both girl and boy students were used in providing “much-needed” labor in the upkeep of their school.\(^{86}\) In a later report, Burnham wrote that one of her students, Jemima Folsom, had transferred to a new school and assisted “Mr. Williams’ family in domestic work.”\(^{87}\) While the use of hard labor was cloaked in a kind of “useful” and “practical” language, it was also a part of what would later be called “outing,” placing the students with white families in need of housekeepers.\(^{88}\)

The girls’ labor also benefited the boys’ school, further separating the two spheres through sexual divisions of labor in ways that would have been unfamiliar to girls brought up in traditional Choctaw culture. Though Choctaw society had gendered labor distinctions, men and women “did not function independently of each other” and their gender roles were less compartmentalized.\(^{89}\) The exceptions to this were the tasks of sewing and weaving, which Choctaw women did almost exclusively, but only after they were taught them by earlier European settlers. It appears from Burnham’s reports at least that most of the girls, especially the older students, were at least somewhat familiar with sewing. In her report from July 1, 1825, Burnham wrote that the girls made 10 or 12 samplers, worked in the kitchen, performed “various kinds of labour” for the family (which family is unclear), made and repaired their own clothes and assisted in “keeping

\(^{86}\) Kidwell, “Choctaw Women and Cultural Persistence,” 123.

\(^{87}\) Anna Burnham, Choctaw Missions, Report of Mayhew Girls’ School, March 5, 1828, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4, 293.


\(^{89}\) Pesantubbee, 453-54.
the boys’ clothes in repair.”\textsuperscript{90} Burnham’s report from 1826 writes that one class of Mayhew girls sewed “36 pantaloons, 10 pr altered, 7 vests made, 11 shirts, 4 hunting frocks, 7 sun bonnets,” or another class, which made “13 shirts, 1 coat, 51 dresses, 56 aprons,” all while keeping “the clothes in repair for the boys school 5 weeks.”\textsuperscript{91} The emphasis placed on avoiding idleness is particularly clear when Burnham notes that this was all, “Labour performed by the girls out of School hours.”

The domestic labor was not the only work that the students performed outside of school, as “so much time is required to attend to the lower classes in school, that it is necessary to attend to writing and geography out of school hours.”\textsuperscript{92} The students also performed more practical tasks by working on “the cultivation of a little garden, in which were a small variety of vegetables, with some cotton and corn.” Burnham’s note on the amount of time needed to devote to the “lower classes” hints at issues with managing so many students with little outside help, something she frequently mentions in later reports.

In this same report from 1826, Burnham lists three people in charge of the girls during their outside sewing and mending work: Mrs. Pride (perhaps a mission wife) until March 10, Miss Emily Folsom from March 10 until July 11, 1826 and Miss Margaret Hall for the rest of the time.

Although the identity of Mrs. Pride is unclear, both Emily Folsom and Margaret Hall were Mayhew students, and their inclusion in the report is an example of Burnham’s frequent use of older girls to help monitor the classes. In this report, Burnham lists Emily Folsom’s age as 18. Margaret Hall was presumably around the same age, since Burnham

\textsuperscript{90} Anna Burnham, Choctaw Missions, Report of Mayhew Girls’ School, July 1, 1825, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4.
\textsuperscript{91} Anna Burnham, Choctaw Missions, Report of Mayhew Girls’ School, 1826, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4, 293.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid.
writes, “The older girls assisted in all the heavy work for the school, and have done their washing etc.” Aside from being extra hands for tasks that smaller girls could not carry out, the two older girls earned the praise of their teacher by “their faithfulness to the girls, and attention to their work out of school.”93

The assistance of older girls was a subject of both appreciation and concern for Burnham. In the same 1826 report she writes, “For many reasons, it is very desirable to employ native teachers and assistants,” and indeed, Burnham’s earlier comment on Folsom and Hall indicates her pride in their behavior and assistance. Burnham speaks of some of these scholars and lays out the exact attributes that would gain her approval,

A number of the oldest scholars by their amiable dispositions, correct deportment, industry in their labours, close application to their studies, and strict adherance to the rules of the school, have gained the affection of their teacher. Especially when it is considered that, by their own exertion, some of them, have emerged from amongst this heathen people, and are desirous of gaining useful information. These qualities not only show to what high standards Burnham held her students but also the one-sided ways in which she measured their progress, considering that they had once been among the “heathen” and were now able to follow “strict adherance to the rules.” To Burnham these girls were, in Peggy Pascoe’s words, “living proof of the transforming power of female moral authority.”94 Older girls like Folsom and Hall were even more prized for their ability to care for their younger, perhaps more unruly, classes, some of whom were “as mischievous and as indolent as can be found anywhere, and need constant watching and prompting.”95

93 Ibid.
95 Anna Burnham, Choctaw Missions, Report of Mayhew Girls’ School, 1826, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4, 293.
In spite of this praise for some of her students, Burnham also articulated reservations in employing “native help,” as “the difficulties arising from it will readily be seen conversing in their own language, which prevents their learning English, and not impressing upon the minds of the children the important truths of the Gospel as opportunities may occur.” Burnham’s comment expresses two important and interconnected issues: one, that by having Choctaw girls help each other, they run the risk of perpetuating their language and cultures; which, two and most important, prevents them from reaching their ultimate goal of learning Scripture and becoming Christians. Burnham laments “for a Catharine Brown to speak of the worth of the Saviour to these dear dying immortals.” By evoking Brown, the famed Cherokee girl who was successfully converted by missionaries, Burnham conveyed her frustration with the lack of converts within her school as well as the absence of persuasive spiritual power that she expected her “native helpers” to possess. One scholar writes that the unrealistic expectations of teachers like Burnham often caused them to feel as if their work was “a lesson in the depths of the human condition,” and only proved to some that their students were “woefully unfamiliar with the lore, paraphernalia, and routines of female domesticity.”

Although it is likely that she still continued to use older Choctaw students with the classes, by 1827 it seems that more female help had been recruited for the school, which also signaled an expansion of the American Board’s mission. It was reported that year that “six unmarried females, who have been approved as well qualified to be useful in the capacity of teachers of children and helpers in domestic concerns” were sent to

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96 Ibid.
97 Devens, 227-28.
Mayhew presumably from New England.\(^98\) Between 1827 and 1828, Burnham was either overwhelmed with her workload or seriously ill, often taking leave of absences to go back to her family in the East. A letter from Burnham to ABCFM Corresponding Secretary Jeremiah Evarts expresses her frustration with the fact that Mayhew’s “whole care and responsibility rested on one individual” (presumably herself), writing,

> In regard to the black help,\(^99\) and others, the inquiry was made only to gain information whether such help is needed… But would say, if allowed to give my opinion, that if two were engaged in teaching the girls it would be much easier managing and instructing them for many reasons. It is almost impossible for one to have their eye fixed upon such scholars constantly attend to them closely, night and day, in sickness and health, in school and out of school hours, their food and clothing, teach them in their various studies and employments. And at the same time attend to the relatives of the children and other natives who are often calling also the many who call to examine the school.\(^100\)

In addition to conducting her work as schoolteacher, Burnham also dealt with the families of the students, who were concerned about the progress of the school and its “necessities.” Her note about watching the scholars “night and day” and in and out of school also suggests that some students lived with her. Mayhew was a day school and many students lived with nearby missionary families, so perhaps Burnham was also caretaker for a few girls as well.

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\(^98\) Over the years, four males, including William Hooper, served as mechanics, farmers and also occasional teachers, though there are fewer records of them in the ABCFM collection. American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Mission Among the Choctaws, Mayhew, *Annual Report: American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission, Volume 18* (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1827), 111. Retrieved from Google Books.

\(^99\) Ibid. Notes from this same report suggest that at some point that year black servants were requested to help at Mayhew and other nearby missions. It should also be noted that the Choctaw practiced slavery, with many Choctaw members owning black slaves or servants. There is no further note that explicitly describes Mayhew having black servants, however.

\(^100\) Anna Burnham to Jeremiah Evarts, May 31, 1828, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4, 270.
Illness added to Burnham’s many stresses, and in 1828 one report noted that Burnham went north the previous spring due to poor health from “long confinement and close application to the business of teaching.” On May 10, 1828, Burnham explained to Evarts that the previous year, “I found myself sinking under the weight of disease,” and lamented that she could not immediately “return and be permitted to labour for souls amongst the dear Chahta,” since “during the time of my residence on mission ground, I have felt an increasing attachment to the dear family with which I have been associated, to the heathen around me.” The sicknesses in the mission school did not just affect the teacher, but also the students. In 1829, Burnham, back at school, reported that, “there has been more sickness in this school the last term.” Burnham describes an awful setting, telling how “watching the tears and hearing the agonizing cry for mercy from these heathen children produced sensations not to be described. This excitement of feeling, added to the care and labour, soon brought on a pulmonary complaint to which I am subject.” In a reference to outside help, she adds that, “I think the school must have been discontinued had not Louisa Cushman been employed as an assistant.”

Burnham’s often candid reports create a bleak picture of the situation at Mayhew and correspond with Carol Devens’ statement that, “Overworked, ill, and ethnocentric teachers were no substitute for the female network on which a girl’s emotional, spiritual, and intellectual development depended.” It is perhaps not surprising that during these later years, Burnham reported more absences and departures from the school, something

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102 Anna Burnham to Jeremiah Evarts from Lenox, May 10, 1828, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4, 270.
103 Anna Burnham, Choctaw Missions, Report of Mayhew Girls’ School, July 30, 1829, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4.
104 Devens, 232.
which becomes even more important to remember when compared to the Mayhew girls’ more optimistic letters to outside sponsors.

In spite of the negative images from her reports and letters, Burnham was invested in her students’ lives and to “the heathen” that she describes in her 1829 report. Death at the mission settlement was a common occurrence during this time, but we see evidence of Burnham’s attachment to her students when she wrote in July 1827, “Suky Folsom, a very dear, promising and most affectionate scholar died while at home with her parents in vacation.” Another student, Susannah Nail, “was expecting to return at the commencement of the last term,” but died after sustaining burns from her clothes catching fire. Burnham expressed her regret by adding that Nail was “an ornament to the school” and “last year appeared deeply convicted of sin – was serious when she left school.” In these reports, Burnham marks the loss of students as a tragedy in the traditional sense, but she perhaps also measures the loss in other ways as well, particularly if the student was “serious” and on the road to religious conversion.

Burnham expressed her connection to her students in other ways as well, measuring some girls’ progress through detailed notes after they left Mayhew. In 1828, Burnham reported that student Emily Folsom, “an excellent girl” of “amiable disposition” while at Mayhew, left school in December 1826, and “is married to a Mr. Robinson, a respectable white man living about three miles from Mayhew.” According to Burnham, the couple seem to be devoted Christians, “are quite punctual in attending worship” and “sometimes walk in the rain” to church. Folsom embodies the qualities of a proper 19th

\[\text{105} \text{ Anna Burnham, Choctaw Missions, Report of Mayhew Girls’ School, July 1827, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4, 228.} \]

\[\text{106} \text{ Anna Burnham, Choctaw Missions, Report of Mayhew Girls’ School, March 5, 1828, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4, 293.} \]
century wife, in being “acquainted with the various kinds of domestic works, such as spinning, weaving, cutting and making men’s clothes” – no doubt learned in part at Mayhew – and exemplifying good behavior as “a kind, affectionate neighbour.” Burnham adds that Folsom “would command respect in any of the white settlements.” Despite these admirable qualities, Burnham finds fault with Folsom’s progress specifically because, though “seriously inclined” she “does not give satisfactory evidence of piety.”

This statement reveals that true piety and godliness are at the core of the Mayhew girls’ instruction, even more than learning domestic skills and true womanhood.

Along similar lines, Burnham’s report on the progress of another favorite former student, Susannah Moore, describes her marriage to a Mr. Thompson, a laborer and native of Ireland who had lived for several years with a mission family. As with Folsom, though Moore is able to “read, write and compose handsomely” with a good knowledge of Scripture, in Burnham’s eyes her piety is also at risk. Burnham writes, “It was thought she gave evidence of a change of heart, was propounded to unite with this church in June last, but since that time more doubt has been entertained respecting her piety.” In spite of this “doubt,” Burnham believes it is nothing more than “a want of uniform engagements,” referring most likely to a stricter church-going regimen.

Burnham’s reports also show the distinction between the missionaries’ goals and those of both the Choctaw and later teachers and government officials. While the Choctaw wished for their children to become a functioning part of society as a means of survival, the goal of the missionaries was always centered on developing devout Christian citizens. Many Choctaw were unaware of the extent of religious education.

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107 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
given to their children, and those that were often disapproved of the practices espoused by the missionaries.

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While many Choctaw tolerated the religious teachings at the mission schools, many were not willing to accept this or to give the missionaries complete control. Choctaw women traditionally taught their daughters the skills needed to tend their fields and homes, letting their children accompany them in the field and woods, and influencing their sons’ education through family connections. As Clara Sue Kidwell notes, Choctaw children learned the values of their tribe through lessons passed down to them by their grandparents. They also enjoyed a great deal of freedom in constantly being included in the adult world. Some Choctaw parents, especially those who were more traditional, saw their children’s new education and emphasis on manual labor and piety as something antithetical to Choctaw culture.

In her reports between 1826 and 1828, Burnham kept careful attendance records of the students at Mayhew, making note of the students who did not return, including those who were removed by their parents. In 1826, for example, 13 out of 37 students did not return. These documented departures, sometimes acts of resistance and evidence of growing discontent with the missionaries, highlight the clashes between teachers like Burnham and the autonomous people she sought to teach and proselytize. The reports are also significant since the information they convey does not appear in the girls’ letters or in other official representations of Mayhew. They provide an important context for

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109 Pesantubbee, 441.
110 Kidwell, Choctaws and Missionaries in Mississippi, 54.
112 Anna Burnham, Choctaw Missions, Report of Mayhew Girls’ School, 1826, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4, 293.
reading the Choctaw students’ letters within the next chapter, particularly those letters sent to outside supporters as proof of the mission’s success.

Students at Mayhew were often removed from school for practical and familial reasons, as with Lucinda Riddle, who left in April 1825 as “it was inconvenient for L’s mother to spare her so long.” Other students were taken for similar reasons as Lucinda Riddle, “not on account of dissatisfaction but convenience.” This, of course, could just be Burnham’s perception or resolution of the situation, when in fact the student may have been dissatisfied with the separation from her home. In this report, Burnham also writes that students Mary Jones, Judith Walker, and Gincy Hall left at the same time, as “the grandmother appeared unwilling to leave Judith and Gincy so far from home without their aunt Lucinda,” implying not only that the girls were somehow related to Lucinda but also showing the importance of family ties within the community. As for Mary Jones, “there was not sufficient encouragement” for her to continue, although “she was extremely anxious to learn,” while Mary Pitchlynn left due to her mother’s illness. Some students were implied to have left due to their level of education and perhaps not seeing a need to continue further, as with Burnham’s note that Margaret Hall left “not expecting to return as a scholar- she had considerable opportunity at school in the white settlements previous coming here.” Other girls violated the school rules – or at least felt they did, such as Teneesee Folsom, who after attending a ball with a friend on the 4th of July, supposed “she could not be received into school again” and did not return. Whether or not Folsom was correct in her assumption, her decision shows her interpretation of the

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113 Anna Burnham, Choctaw Missions, Report of Mayhew Girls’ School, July 1, 1825, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4.
114 Ibid.
proper conduct of young ladies, most likely emphasized at Mayhew, as well as her deference to Burnham.

Many students’ departure from school was due to strong disapproval from their parents, and were often preceded by visits or notes of concern from the family. On April 27, 1825 Burnham reported that Judith Wisner was taken from Mayhew by her adopted mother, since “they did not feel at liberty to take her out of the nation and her mother has been threatening to take her some time.”¹¹⁵ During this month especially, Mayhew lost many students, with Wisner’s neighbor Anna Homer also leaving at the same time. The girls’ families’ distance from the school – about “2 or 3 days journey” as recorded by Burnham – was not uncommon, and no doubt had an effect on their families’ concern for them. Other mothers clashed with Burnham over the ways they perceived their daughters were being harshly treated. One mother, presumably upon seeing her daughter’s unhappiness at school, remarked “I do not like to hear my youngest daughter cry,” something that for Burnham “made it more difficult to govern her than it would have been otherwise.” Burnham noted that the mother eventually took her daughter from Mayhew “on account of her being corrected,” perhaps implying discipline or punishment, which elicited anger from several Choctaw mothers.

These instances of resistance and disapproval from Choctaw mothers reveal the constant tensions and negotiations at the mission settlement, while according to Jane Hunter, also emphasize that mission sites were indeed places of “encounter and exchange where individuals met, interacted and triggered change.”¹¹⁶ As central figures in their

¹¹⁵ Ibid.
communities and in the caretaking of their children, it is obvious why many Choctaw women would have been loathe to relinquish total control over their daughters’ well beings. The education of the girls at Mayhew “involved an invasion into the most intimate spaces,” taking them from their homes and creating ideals for new ones, “and relationships of indigenous people’s lives.” Upon being removed from school, a student, Visa, told Burnham “I have no Choctaw ma’a now, I have only an English ma’a.” Whether true or not, this declaration must not have rested well with her mother.

While distance, the teachers’ style and other factors influenced Choctaw parents’ removal of their children from Mayhew, the girls’ new religious education was undoubtedly the greatest factor in resistance among Choctaw families. In 1827 Burnham wrote that some students left “on account of their parents being dissatisfied with the state of religious inquiry at Mayhew.” Students Arte and Polly Beams were “probably taken on account of the religious excitement to which their relatives were exceedingly opposed.” Both of these reports once again point out the different educational goals of the Choctaw from the missionaries. They wanted their children to learn to read and write, but not necessarily to undergo religious instruction. Sometimes it was not just the parents but also the students themselves who apparently requested to discontinue their studies, due to what Burnham refers to again as “the religious excitement.” In describing this scene at the school, Burnham writes that some students “who could not speak English appeared to have a deep sense of the wickedness of their own hearts,” and for many

118 Anna Burnham, Choctaw Missions, Report of Mayhew Girls’ School, July 1, 1825, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4.
120 Anna Burnham, Choctaw Missions, Report of Mayhew Girls’ School, July 1827, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4, 228.
weeks “were heard crying for mercy almost constantly night and day.” As Burnham noted, this vocal repentance was “good evidence” of the children growing as “followers of the meek and lowly Jesus.” For many students and parents though, this behavior seemed frightening and foreign.

The removal of children from the school points not only to a dismissal of the missionaries’ religious instruction, but also to the exercising of autonomy among Choctaw parents and children. Examples of these forms of resistance show how pre-removal education was still very voluntary among the Choctaw. Burnham found this rejection of religion to be distressing, writing that some students “have exhibited a most awful turning away from the truth and have chosen darkness rather than light, even after having been deeply convicted of sin.” She found the presence of Mr. Byington, who arrived to give the students religious instruction in Choctaw, to be a great help in her endeavors. By the following year, several students still expressed a desire to leave the school on account of religion, such as Orrilla Folsom, who left school for her mother’s home in 1828. Folsom’s departure from Mayhew also speaks to her mother’s continued power at home. Though the previous spring Folsom “was the subject of serious impressions,” these feelings left her and she became “opposed to religion and religious conversation.” Burnham speculated that this was “perhaps, the reason why she did not return to school.” Although some students may not have wanted to leave the school but were taken by their parents, several others demonstrated that ultimately they were still free to come and go from the school. This became increasingly rare by the end of the

121 Ibid.
122 Anna Burnham to Jeremiah Evarts, July 31, 1827, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4.
123 Anna Burnham, Choctaw Missions, Report of Mayhew Girls’ School, March 5, 1828, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4, 293.
nineteenth century, as the federal government took control of schools, regulating the removal, instruction and keeping of the children in ways that the underfunded and understaffed missionaries during this time never could.

Burnham’s reports are significant in revealing the complexity of relations at the mission and the students’ exercising of their individual agency, if often through their parents. Knowledge of the underlying tensions and reasons for the declining enrollment at Mayhew over the years creates a crucial context in which to understand the experiences not just of missionary teachers like Burnham but of the Choctaw students. With growing resistance from Choctaw parents and the bleak circumstances within Mayhew, it was even more important that Burnham and the Mayhew missionaries present their school through carefully constructed propaganda in the form of testimonies – letters – from their own students. The tensions and struggles that many students experienced while trying to navigate both their Choctaw culture and their new school home, as evidenced in Burnham’s reports, ultimately shaped how and what they wrote in their letters.
Chapter II

More Than “Vessels” of Christianity: The Mayhew Girls’ Letters

Between 1826 and 1828, girls at the Mayhew Mission School wrote letters to their teacher and to various outside supporters. While less than twenty of these letters exist in the ABCFM collection, judging from Burnham’s academic reports it can be assumed that almost all of the girls wrote letters or practiced composition as a part of their daily education at the school. The existing letters showcase the crucial place that writing occupied in nineteenth century education and religious instruction, as well as the ways in which mission schools received continued support from the American Board. Letters were often published in the Missionary Herald, the official publication of the American Board, and served as proof that the Choctaw were becoming civilized Americans. At one point in the 19th century, evangelical publications like the Missionary Herald were more popular than secular magazines, and constituted a stable financial base.

The majority of the existing letters were authored by girls from the older classes at Mayhew, and generally those who had a greater grasp of the English language, with the exception of two or three students. This does not seem to be a coincidence, particularly with the letters that were addressed to American Board officials or another missionary organization. Burnham also makes it clear in one report that reading and writing went hand in hand with learning Scripture. She comments that in addition to reading some of the New Testament, Webster’s Spelling Book, and the Pious Stranger, the students “committed Scripture in Chahta and English” and were instructed that “when wishing to

124 Kidwell, Choctaws and Missionaries in Mississippi, 123.
communicate anything to their teacher, it is presented on a slate.” Indeed, most of Burnham’s commentary on the students’ writing lessons involves learning parts of the Bible. This method would have had multiple practical reasons, mainly that translating written Choctaw to written English via Scripture, “objectifies the words and their meaning and gives them permanence” to the student.\textsuperscript{127}

The girls’ letters could also be used to teach other students about Christianity, as in a letter from student Anna Homer to her classmate Eliza in 1827. Homer writes to her “dear friend,”

I write to you this morning a few words. Well you may choose the Savior and truly follow him – he has come down from God and died for us, and he has gone to heaven to prepare a place. Who might believe on him go to that place. When we choose to believe in him he is ready to change our hearts.\textsuperscript{128}

Homer’s words display her knowledge of basic Christian principles and of language that seems strongly influenced by Scripture. She urges her friend to “try to be born again” and tells her “Let us both try to give up ourselves to God,” suggesting that Burnham may have encouraged the girls to not only record their spiritual experiences but also act as “helpers” in encouraging their classmates. Homer ends her letter with the first stanza of the traditional hymn “See the Lord of Glory Dying.” This affirms the purpose of her letter and also shows the ways in which students like Homer would have learned English and writing – through hymns, poems and memorization.

The girls’ letters exhibit more than a connection to religious rhetoric and Christian doctrine, but an adherence to the nineteenth century rhetoric of “true womanhood” and

\textsuperscript{126} Anna Burnham, Choctaw Missions, Report of Mayhew Girls’ School, July 1, 1825, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4.
\textsuperscript{127} Kidwell, Choctaws and Missionaries in Mississippi, 83.
\textsuperscript{128} Anna Homer to Eliza, 1827, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4, 237.
Protestant, domestic femininity. Although many of the girls’ letters seem to follow a more formal template, several of the letters display remarkably gendered, personal language, with the use of words like “benevolent exertions,” “testimony of our friendship,” “affectionate friend,” and frequently addressing Burnham as “dear mother” or “sister.” The first few phrases in particular, with the emphasis on benevolence, sisterhood and affection, embody the representation of an ideal, charitable female figure of the time.

While it is impossible to discern true sincerity or intimacy between the girls and Burnham through the letters, the language serves a subconscious purpose in at least outwardly connecting the girls to their teacher. As historian Margaret Jacobs argues, teachers often created a role for themselves as surrogate mothers through specific rhetoric to bond with their students and break down female authority within the girls’ native communities. In this way, the letters exemplify just how imperialistic power structures were perpetuated.

Much like the girls themselves, however, the letters defy simple categorization; they are neither diary entries nor formal accounts of Native American schooling, like those that were written by Indian students in the late 19th century. It is true that all of the letters are clear examples of assimilation tactics at work. Most all of the letters fall into the categories that scholar Betty Ann Bergland classifies as “responses of Indians to Christian missionaries, including rejection, accommodation, and a divided response,” yet

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even this description does not fully describe the letters. It is how the girls *used* these tools and letter-writing assignments for their own benefit that matters most here.

As in other aspects of their schooling, the Mayhew girls were not merely puppets of their teacher and not all of them adhered to a rigid letter writing structure. Many of the girls in these letters used their newly acquired writing skills to express their conflicted desires and doubts as they experienced the effects of biculturalism. Betty Ann Bergland writes that in the act of letter writing, the students “reconstruct themselves as Indians, as Christians – that is, as complex persons with multiple identities.” While we may not as readily encounter Bergland’s assertion in letters like Anna Homer’s, which follows a more formal structure, the very presence of many of the girls’ letters and testimonies “give witness to the real history of the occupied land and challenge simple, dualistic interpretations.”

The letters open up the possibility of understanding how some girls reclaimed a form of identity for themselves in the face of the erasure of their culture. Literary scholar Hilary Wyss argues that several scholars refuse to deal with letters of this nature either because of the “highly charged political issue” they represent or because they do not embody enough of an “authentic” Indian voice. I fully agree with Wyss’s view that to learn from these letters, we must view them in their proper context and consider them part of a “double translation,” a look at the experience of Native American girls in a developing hybrid culture. Though these letters were often used as promotional pieces

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131 Ibid, 186.
132 Ibid.
for the missionary work, they also represent the value placed on the girls’ voices. Just as some girls chose to leave the school in response to the teachings or in rejection of Burnham’s maternal influence, as I described in Chapter 1, others formed a seemingly close relationship with their teacher. In the same way, these letters represent a mixture of neither complete rejection of Mayhew’s teachings nor complete assimilation. They are evidence of the lived experiences of girls vacillating between two worlds, negotiating two distinct and intermingled cultures, and often exposing the flaws in the mission’s program.

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Through the letters that the Mayhew girls wrote to outside supporters, we can read instances of the ways in which they articulated their new faith and attempted to navigate their dual cultures. In addition to acting as writing lessons in school, these letters embodied “centerpieces of mission public relations efforts”\textsuperscript{134} and effectively used the girls as examples of the “heathen’s” progress towards Christianity and civilization. One blatant example of this form of propaganda is a letter from student Anna Homer to Mr. Hooper, presumably William Hooper, once a teacher at Mayhew and later at Elliott.\textsuperscript{135} In what appears to be a religious testimonial and proclamation of her faith, similar to the one she wrote to her classmate in 1827, Homer writes, “I am very happy today the day is very sweet day for me. I think this day Jesus is with me. I pray for sinners very much.”\textsuperscript{136}

Though her English is simple, Homer’s letter clearly expresses the religious teachings at Mayhew and her own place within them. In demonstrating her newfound faith, Homer

\textsuperscript{134} Pascoe, 113.
\textsuperscript{136} Anna Homer to Mr. Hooper, April 20, 1827, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4, 238.
also separates herself from the non-Christians, writing, “I want all to become Christians. Oh how sweet it is,” and later saying, “I feel thankful to God for sending his missionary servants here.” To Mr. Hooper and missionary supporters, Homer’s words would have been a testament to the mission’s success, at least outwardly, in converting its students. By writing about her spiritual connection, Homer’s letter would have been viewed as more official proof of her conversion, since for the missionaries, literacy, writing and true Christianity were all connected.  

Homer’s distinction between herself and non-Christians, and her gratefulness for the “missionary servants,” posed a problem created by these types of admissions of faith. This letter would no doubt have gained Burnham’s approval, but it also separated Homer further from her Choctaw community, which she hopes to avoid by wishing for “all to become Christians.” Homer’s admission of faith also had more positive effects. Even if it was influenced and engineered by missionaries, the letter was her production and her way of expressing a new spirituality. In one scholar’s assessment of Native American writings in colonial America, she posits that by “writing their own narratives of conversions, Natives were defining their place in a newly forming colonial structure.” Although not exactly a “narrative of conversion,” a similar analysis could be applied to letters like Homer’s, and indeed, most of the letters written by Choctaw girls at Mayhew. In the very act of documenting their changing personal world, the girls push beyond a subaltern status (to evoke Gayatri Spivak), expressing their experiences and how they perceived their placement in society and life.

138 Ibid, 5.
While Homer’s letter shows her acknowledgement and negotiation of her spiritual “placement” in her community, other letters allow the girls to document their daily experiences at Mayhew and the contradictions of their important roles within a new system that subjugated them at the same time. A letter from student Susannah Moore to the Female Bible Society of the Ceylon on June 24, 1826 exemplifies this contradiction of a potential convert speaking through the mission context while also writing from her own point of view as an individual student. In the letter, Moore writes to the Ceylon girls, “Dear unknown friends,” to tell them that, after reading about their Bible Society in The Missionary Herald, they were inspired to form their own Society at Mayhew. As with most of the letters written from Mayhew girls to outside groups or sponsors, the format is carefully constructed. Moore uses typical nineteenth century rhetoric to establish a sense of “sisterhood” and shared Christian values across countries and missions, with words like “testimony of our friendship,” “affectionate” and “sincere desire for your best goods.” Even if Moore did not employ this language outside of school, the use of these words to connect with other female societies was an indication of Mayhew’s teachings of proper language and female values to its students.

Moore’s letter to the Ceylon girls is not just a way to connect two missions while showing the proper deportment of the Mayhew girls; it is also a chance for the author to exhibit her own knowledge and sense of the world. From the beginning of the letter, Moore geographically situates herself and her schoolmates, writing, Though you are strangers to us we think you would like to receive a letter from your Chahta friends in America in the state of Mississippi. We think those of you who

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139 Susannah Moore to the Female Bible Society of the Ceylon School, June 24, 1826, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4, 257.
have studied Geography have often seen it on the map. We know nothing about you only what we heard read in the Missionary Herald but we should like to commence a correspondence with the girls at Ceylon. It would be very gratifying to us here if the girls on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean would write to us.

By giving her reasons for commencing a correspondence, Moore establishes herself within a larger context. Moore writes that, “We too are instructed by missionaries who are sent by the same Society which sent the missionaries to you,” and connects her school to the expanding mission program. In mentioning reading about the Ceylon girls through the missionary magazine, Moore shows her literacy and also acknowledges a connection to other mission students. The girls are in similar situations and through their Bible societies, can look to each other for shared experiences and a sense of friendship.

Moore’s letter does not just affirm female friendship across lands, but also asserts the Mayhew girls’ faithfulness and piousness. Moore shows pride in describing the work the girls did for their Bible Society, earning twelve dollars to send to the American Board. Her language and tone then shifts to one of slightly more authority, as she expresses her gratitude that the Ceylon girls have “an interest in the Lord Jesus Christ,” and remarks that, “There is none of us here that think much about God, or are anxious about our souls.” Moore goes on to say, “if we do not repent of our sins, we must go down to hell and be tormented” and asks for the prayers of the Ceylon girls. This passage is a bit confusing, but suggests that although Moore knows that the Choctaw people are not “anxious” about their souls, she knows the importance of repentance. This passage shows another of the letter’s goals: to affirm the success of the mission’s teachings on the Mayhew girls, especially in using this to reach other mission children.
Moore gives further evidence of the mission’s outward success and the students’ immersion in Protestant female values when she describes a busy day at school. From the time Burnham rings the bell for the girls in the morning - after which they “rise and wash and comb,” suggesting that they are living at or near the school - the girls are constantly at work reading the Bible or studying the Apostles, and doing chores or lessons, all regulated and following a system of bells. The detailed description of the girls’ day shows the school’s assimilation tactics at work, with the girls following a strict balance of religious activity, physical labor and academics. On the outside, it would appear that Moore is simply relaying the tasks and lessons of her school days, all part of her training in becoming a “true” Christian woman.

Within this structured school system, however, Moore has the opportunity to claim a voice for herself, both within this letter and in the formation of the Bible Society. At the end of the letter, Moore lists the names and ages of each of her classmates, along with the list of officers of the Mayhew Bible Society, with 3 “directoresses” and Moore as Corresponding Secretary. Even if it is not explicitly expressed, the creation of officers for this Bible Society elevates Moore’s role in the school, as being the designated student to write a letter to girls overseas. It is probable that the Bible Society was most likely set up by Burnham or the American Board, with the mini-society acting as a microenvironment for learning religion and proper deportment. However, the creation of roles and specific tasks carved out a space of autonomy for the girls, and perhaps ironically, gave them a sense of the importance they would have had within the Choctaw community. Moore’s role as Corresponding Secretary as well as her frequent appearance as a “representative” of Mayhew in other letters also seems to be connected to her
relatively strong grasp of the English language. At the very least, girls like Moore were given more complicated or lengthier letters to write and had more opportunities to express themselves through letters, as opposed to letters with simpler, shorter treatises.

While students like Moore negotiated the contradictions of their situation through letters to other girls, some students used their limited writing skills to discuss the hardships of their personal lives while inadvertently exposing the growing ideology of maternal imperialism. Susannah Nail was eleven years old in 1826 when she wrote a letter to Mrs. Williams from Lenox, Massachusetts, presumably an ABCFM sponsor or friend of Burnham. Nail begins slightly awkwardly, “Will you please to accept a letter from Susannah Nail,” and then thanks Mrs. Williams for a piece of cloth she sent, which Burnham then took and “made Jemima Folsom and little Doreen Hooper and myself aprons.” This detail points not only to the donations made by outsiders, and the mission’s frequent need of supplies, but also the purpose of the cloth, made into aprons which the girls would presumably use in their domestic tasks.

Nail’s letter is a strong example of the way that seemingly mundane details give insight into the home lives of the girls. Nail reveals that Doreen Hooper is “a little motherless girl,” fourteen months old, that Nail and Jemima Folsom help Burnham care for, since the little girl’s mother, “a very good woman,” died the previous year. Nail could be referring to the wife of missionary William Hooper. Like little Doreen Hooper, Nail writes that she is also missing a parent, adding, “I am a poor fatherless girl my Father has been dead four years, my mother is old. I don’t know how soon God will take her away.” While this last note was perhaps written to elicit more support from

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140 Susannah Nail to Mrs. Williams, June 24, 1826, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4.
141 Kidwell, Choctaws and Missionaries in Mississippi, 53.
sponsors, this personal detail alerts us to another likely situation. Burnham’s surrogate motherhood at Mayhew carried over to life outside of school, as she apparently cared for a baby and perhaps also Susannah Nail. Girls like Nail who were nearly orphaned may have been even more dependent on both the good will of their teacher and of outside supporters, giving this letter another meaning.

Despite her vulnerable situation, in this letter Nail took an active role in documenting the difficult times at Mayhew. She writes that “five of the missionaries have left Mayhew last year because they were sick, Mrs. Cushman and her youngest daughter are very feeble.” What more, Burnham is also sick with a cold, but “takes something that was sent from the North every day to strengthen her to take care of us.” Nail places a special emphasis on Burnham’s taking a medicine so that she can continue her duties to care for the children. By writing on the conditions at Mayhew, Nail not acted as a first-hand reporter on the harsh realities of mission life but also constructed her letter in a way that would have gained Mrs. William’s sympathy. The letter perhaps becomes more poignant in knowing that Nail would also succumb to the dangers of mission life when she died the following year from burns sustained after her clothes caught fire.142

Other girls were given similar tasks of writing letters to outside supporters in which they also hinted at their personal matters or life at Mayhew. Emily Folsom’s letter to Orrilla B. Stanley, also of Lenox, Massachusetts, on June 20, 1826, is a perfect example of the ways in which students used otherwise typical “sponsor letters” to navigate their way between two very different worlds. It seems likely that Stanley was a supporter of the Board, particularly when Folsom thanks her for her gifts of “quills, pin-

142 Anna Burnham, Choctaw Missions, Report of Mayhew Girls’ School, March 5, 1828, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4, 293.
cushion and paper,” examples of in-demand items that also would have supplemented the girls’ domestic education.\textsuperscript{143} Despite Folsom’s insistence that “it is hard for me to write this is almost the first letter that I have written,” she perfectly employs the rhetoric typical of young girls from this time period. For example, Folsom begins her letter with, “My dear friend, it is with pleasure that I sit down to write you” and signs it “Your affectionate friend.” Folsom also alludes to Stanley having sent her a lock of her hair as a token of friendship, another popular custom of the period, when she writes, “I wish I could see you, when I saw your hair it seemed as if I saw you.” Folsom goes on to describe the scene at Mayhew, writing, “There are 25 girls in school, some of them this morning are writing composition.” Indeed, nothing from Folsom’s letter seems particularly out of the ordinary.

As with Susannah Nail’s letter, however, Folsom’s letter becomes more personal when she turns to her family situation. Whatever the purpose for this change of topic – if it was to increase the sympathy and thus support on Stanley, or just to talk a little about herself – the letter is now about Folsom. Folsom first reveals that she visits her sister, who lives a mile from Mayhew, every Saturday. This is perhaps made more important when she mentions, “I have been to school two years, I should have been to school when it first commenced but my mother was sick…she has been dead 3 years.” Folsom asks for empathy from her reader as she writes, “I am a poor girl, it is a very hard trial to part with a mother, you will feel very bad when your mother dies.” Just like Nail’s letter, it is interesting that Folsom, another parentless student, would be commissioned to write a letter to someone who was likely a supporter. This may have been an intentional move on

\textsuperscript{143} Emily Folsom to Orrilla B. Stanley, June 20, 1826, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4, 212.
Burnham’s part to elicit more financial support, but it also serves two other purposes: to affirm Folsom’s spiritual growth and to give her an emotional outlet through writing.

Folsom’s mentioning of more sober matters leads her into a discussion of mortality and Christianity, and she ends the letter by writing, “I want to see you very much, but I do not know as we shall ever meet in this world, but we shall in the world to come.” Folsom’s insistence that “if we are not Christians we must go down to hell,” is another example of the constant presence of the Christian mission in the teachings of the Mayhew girls, even within a letter that began on a lighter note. Mayhew girls frequently used these types of God-fearing admissions in their letters, asking for the prayers and support of their reader in becoming good Christians in the face of discouragement from friends or family. They seemed to have been included to affirm the student’s religious teachings not only to themselves, but to also show their progress to outside supporters. To missionaries, the anxiety and excitement caused by religion, and the admissions of it in letters like these, were indications of progress in God working on their souls. As Clara Sue Kidwell writes, to the children, especially if they had not been exposed to Christianity and also faced the rupture of their family structure, this “powerlessness” was “totally antithetical to traditional Choctaw beliefs.”

Folsom’s affirmation of her mortality and the need for Christianity represented a rupture with her Choctaw heritage, but also her recognition of the realities of her situation. To Folsom, embracing Christianity may be a form of comfort and of self-preservation at the mission, which is made even clearer as she writes, “Dear Orrilla let us pray to God for each other. I want a new heart.” In her desire to have “a new heart,”

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144 Anna Homer to Mr. Hooper, April 19, 1827, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4, 237.
145 Kidwell, Choctaws and Missionaries in Mississippi, 72.
Folsom also illustrates her understanding of the deep conflicts between traditional beliefs and the missionaries’ Protestantism. When she writes to Stanley that, “You have a mother to who can tell you about God, but my mother did not know anything about God,” Folsom not only shows the centrality of motherhood to learning, both within the Choctaw and mission communities, but also reveals her recognition of her mother’s isolation from the community to which Folsom now belongs. By remaining ignorant of God, Folsom’s mother could not teach her daughter about Christianity but it is also implied that Folsom feels regret that her mother died without “joining” Folsom in her new beliefs. Folsom reassures Stanley however, that “Miss B. is like my mother, she tells me a great many things, I love her very much,” referring to Burnham’s attempts to be a maternal role model for the girls. These last few sentences especially reveal the internal conflict that girls like Folsom faced, between allegiances to two different communities and two different forms of motherhood, and their attempt to publicly negotiate them within their letters.

Whereas both Nail and Folsom’s letters to female supporters of the mission allow for more of a look into the tensions and struggles in their personal lives, student letters to male officials change significantly not only in tone but in content. A notable example of this change is from Susannah Moore’s letter to Captain Folsom and the Choctaw Council in July 1826. Taking a more public role as representative of her school, Moore read aloud her letter - “written hastily” the morning before – at the commencement of a public examination attended by the Council.¹⁴⁶ The public examination seems to have been held largely in response to criticism from some Choctaw leaders about the constant requests for supplies from the missionaries and what they perceived to be a lack of academic

¹⁴⁶ Susannah Moore to David Folsom, July 11, 1826, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4, 238.
Choctaw “mixed-blood” leaders like David Folsom and missionary officials wished to reassure the Choctaw Council that they were right to continue supporting the mission school. Susannah Moore’s public address was most certainly part of this public relations campaign. Moore opens the examination by saying,

Respected sir, I am happy that I have the opportunity of saying a few words to you. We rejoice to think that we have a Chief who is a friend to his people and wishes their good and favors the schools in the nation. Had it not been for you and the friends of missions we think we should have been wandering about in the wilderness. We have heard people say the missionaries here do us no good, and now is the time for them to see if we are in the same situation that we were even four years ago. In these first few lines, Moore uses correct rhetoric and flattering language towards Folsom, the Choctaw Chief. She also once again uses the metaphor of “wandering about in the wilderness,” creating a common contrast between what the Choctaw children were “before” the missionaries arrived and what they are now, civilized Christian children. In this regard, there must have been considerable pressure on the girls to perform their exercises and recitations well, especially in front of an audience. Moore recognizes this and goes on to thank the missionaries and telling the Council, “we hope you will not be disappointed in what we are able to perform, we know we are very deficient and are just beginning to learn.” With these words especially, Moore is not just a representative of her school but also a sort of mediator, preparing the audience for any mistakes they may find.

In this type of letter it is nearly impossible to glean any of Moore’s personal voice aside from the one she presents to the Choctaw Council; this address was clearly intended to present the students as hardworking and holds a confident yet humble tone. Like Nail

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147 Kidwell, *Choctaws and Missionaries in Mississippi*, 41.
and Folsom, Moore outwardly defers to the authorities in her need to excuse herself and her classmates for any mistakes in their presentation. Nevertheless, it is important that once again Moore was chosen to represent the group. At 13, she was not the oldest in the school, and because only so few of the Mayhew girls’ letters exist, it is impossible to know if she had the strongest grasp of English. Perhaps she embodied – or was able to display publicly – the qualities of a diligent, pious scholar that Burnham considered as signs of progress.

Moore repeated this contradictory tone of leadership and deference in her letter to Reverend Timothy Cooley of East Granville, Massachusetts in July or August 1826. Cooley was most likely a mission supporter or friend of Burnham. The letter was apparently written in order to relieve Burnham of her work, as “She has spent several years in teaching us, and it has prevented her fulfilling her engagements and answering letters that she has received,” and so “says the girls must write for her.”¹⁴⁸ In addressing a religious man, it was once again important that Moore represent the school in a positive light, reusing the metaphor “wandering about in the wilderness” to describe herself and her classmates before the missionaries arrived. Still, Moore’s writing echoes her earlier letter to the Ceylon girls, downplaying her skills by writing, “I am afraid to say anything fearing I shall not write anything that will be acceptable.”

While Moore may hesitate over her writing, it is in returning to her distinguishing role as a Christian that she establishes a tone of comfortable assertiveness in the rest of the letter. We get a sense of Moore’s status in the school when she tells Cooley, “Miss B. informed me that you are teaching some Pious young gentlemen, if you have any that feel for the heathen this is the place for them.” In speaking of the “heathen” as such, Moore

¹⁴⁸ Susannah Moore to Reverend Cooley, July 1 or August 26, 1826, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4, 253.
sets herself apart from the “many thousands” in the Nation who are not Christians, although she observes encouragingly, “I think some of the people about here are improving very fast and love to come to meeting more now than ever.” She sees improvement in their comportment as well, remarking that, “Long time ago they used to kill their children, but now they do not.” The meaning of this is unclear, but it could perhaps relate to previous violence or infanticide among the Choctaw.

Moore’s confident tone continues as she reassures Cooley of Mayhew’s progress, remarking upon a visit made by Mr. Evarts to the school, “Mr E thought this school would compare well with the schools in New England.” In reporting on the school’s activities and good works, Moore tells Cooley of the 25 girls at Mayhew who “learn very fast this term,” and avoid idleness by forming themselves into a Bible Society. While sewing, “the girls have read the memoirs of Mrs. Abigail Waters, Henry Obookiah, Levi Parsons, Catharine Brown, considerably of Henry Martin” and other books. That Moore lists these particular memoirs is significant, since all of the people were either nineteenth century foreign missionaries (Henry Martyn, Levi Parsons) or famous converts.

Henry Obookiah was a native Hawaiian Christian convert, while Catharine Brown in particular would have been made very familiar to the girls, as she was a part Cherokee girl educated at Brainerd Mission School (another ABCFM mission station) as recently as 1817. Although she died young, she embodied what many missionaries revered as being “pious and chaste, industrious and humble, absolutely committed to the conversion of her people to Christianity.”

Anna Burnham lamented in one report, “O for a Catharine

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Brown to speak of the worth of the Saviour to these dear dying immortals.”

Moore’s listing of these significant memoirs speaks not only to her missionary education and the kinds of role models the girls were given, but also perhaps her awareness of the types of works she and her classmates should be reading, especially in the eyes of Reverend Cooley.

Throughout the letter Moore is fairly straightforward and encouraging in her reports, and so it is both surprising and indicative of the duality of her life when she expresses anxiety at the end of the letter. Moore writes, “Sometimes I think I will not stop praying until I have found the Saviour of sinners, and when the subject of religion touches my heart, I sometimes want to flee away from it.” This sense of devotion mixed with overwhelming fear is echoed in other Mayhew girls’ letters, such as Anna Homer’s from 1827 when she writes of her new faith, “For a few days past, I am very uneasy fearing my heart may turn back to stupidity.”

It is important to note that to Burnham, this would not have necessarily been a bad sign; the fear of God would have signaled progress. Indeed, Burnham reported that many of her older students had “by their own exertion emerged from amongst this heathen people and are desirous of gaining useful information.”

For girls like Moore and Homer, though, these admissions of anxiety over sin and religious excitement show their struggles with the overwhelming newness of religious conversion. Placed within a relatively isolated and focused environment at Mayhew, their desire to be “good” and part of the community was no doubt even more intense. Moore’s anxiety in this letter is a solid example of her occupation of a cultural middle ground,
moving between her knowledge of the past (and the “sinners”) and what she is supposed to become. Perhaps this is what leads her to distinguish herself from the rest of the Choctaw community by writing that, “There is none of the people here belonging to the nation that is become religious.” In a way this separates the girls from Mayhew, who at least appear to be on their way to salvation, with the rest of the nation, and it defines Moore’s tenuous place within that world.

The so-called “narratives of conversion” in this chapter, all written to outside supporters, show the ways in which the Mayhew girls had begun to assimilate culturally and religiously. They also show the doubts and uncertainty that they still entertained, some brought on perhaps by traumatic life events, that gave them even more of a need to distinguish themselves and negotiate their own place. This is perhaps why many of the letters display a mixture of confidence and hesitation in the girls’ voices; they were figuring out their place and this often meant separating themselves theoretically from their home community. Other girls’ letters reveal even more of this cultural negotiation as well as the ways in which the letters often exposed the flaws of maternal imperialism at Mayhew.

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In addition to writing letters to outside sponsors, the Mayhew girls also frequently wrote letters to their teacher, Anna Burnham. These letters to Burnham continue to show the complex world that the girls inhabited, often trying to find a way to function with their families and Choctaw communities while maintaining a loyalty to their school and to a teacher who often acted as a surrogate mother. Since the letters were often more personal, they also show how the girls attempted to negotiate their situations, using the
rhetoric they were taught at Mayhew to make requests, express their feelings or map out their place within the school social structure. As with the letters written to outsiders, the girls’ true feelings are not always as evident.

Like the letters from the girls to female supports, the letters to Burnham demonstrate an outwardly close, trustworthy relationship, speaking to her as a “friend” and mother figure, while also displaying the feminine, religious rhetoric that they were taught. These letters, though not directly addressed to sponsors, would most likely have been included in reports from Burnham to the American Board. It is impossible to know the true relationship between Burnham and these students, whether they really looked upon her as a mother figure, as some of their letters indicate. We also cannot know for certain whether or not the girls’ documented written struggles with their religion were encouraged as part of a “religious testimony” to be sent to the American Board.

Emily Folsom’s letter from July 7, 1826 to Anna Burnham exhibits a divided loyalty between her close student-teacher relationship with Burnham and her larger continued connection to the Choctaw community. The letter follows a similar structure as her earlier letter to Orrilla Stanley, using familiar language by addressing Burnham as “My Dear mother” and signing the letter “Your affectionate daughter,” two things made more significant by the fact that Folsom’s mother had died. Folsom alludes to Burnham being away in the “sixtowns” (Six Towns, a part of the Choctaw Nation) and so it is possible that this letter was an assignment from a temporary teacher. Folsom also thanks Burnham for coming to the school and assuring her, “Since you came here the girls have improved very much in their behaveour [sic].”

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153 Emily Folsom to Anna Burnham, July 7, 1826, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4, 212.
Folsom also notes her awareness of the larger tensions among the Choctaws and missionaries, and possibly where she stands in this conflict. Folsom writes that the education has not reached all of the Mayhew girls, since “When the children go home I think they will go to dancing and make you feel as if your troubles was lost.” She probably refers to traditional Choctaw dances, such as those in the annual green corn ceremony or the ball-play, eagle or war dances, cultural traditions that were discouraged by the missionaries. In this reference, Folsom distinguishes herself from other more “sinful” girls at her school and also shows her awareness of Burnham’s regard of things such as the Choctaw’s traditional dances as sinful and not at all complying with the lifestyle at Mayhew. The reference also alludes to an overall sense of resistance to the missionaries’ new customs among some of the Choctaw people, something which Folsom emphasizes when she laments, “When will my poor fellow countrymen hear to God oh what a happy thing it will be when I shall see my people praying to God.” Though a student at Mayhew and displaying signs of religious conversion, by referring to them as “my poor fellow countrymen,” Folsom clearly still feels connected to the Choctaw and has not entirely separated herself from them culturally. It is understandable that Folsom would want to reconcile these two worlds, to have her people join her without relinquishing her loyalty to the school.

Other letters show not just hints of the Choctaw community’s resistance but also more expressions of the students’ personal struggles with their faith. In March and May of 1827, fourteen year-old Susannah Moore was away at home, most likely helping care for her sick father, and in this time she wrote two letters to Burnham expressing her worry and sadness. In the letter from March 22, 1827, Moore writes to her “dear teacher,”

154 Pesantubbee, 449.
Once more I look to God to put thoughts in my way to write you. I will assure you my dear friend that I find God a very present help in trouble and that he is very near me, sometimes I am in the dark but he has brought me out of all distress, but I don’t know how long he may stay with me, I feel myself a very ungrateful creature.\footnote{Susannah Moore to Anna Burnham, March 22, 1827, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4.}

In expressing these conflicted feelings about God’s ability to ultimately help her, Moore\footnote{Jacobs, “Maternal Colonialism,” 470.} seems to expose doubts about the faith which Burnham had taught her the past few years. Burnham and the missionaries might have viewed this as proof of Moore’s acknowledgement of her humbleness and lowliness in the face of God, and thus proof of her evolution as a Christian. Indeed, Moore signs the letter, “in the weak prayer of your unworthy though affectionate scholar.” As Margaret Jacobs writes, Indian girls’ doubts or clear objections to their education often were not made public, with the exception of later accounts written by students like Zitkala-Sa, a more well-known Yankton Dakota girl.\footnote{Jacobs, “Maternal Colonialism,” 470.}

Moore’s letter to Burnham was likely Burnham’s way of keeping track of her student’s spiritual progress while she was away.

Curiously, Moore also notes, “The day that I left Mayhew, when I got about halfway God did reveal his mercies to me more abundantly than ever he had before.” Perhaps Moore means that God showed her mercy amidst her sadness over leaving her school. This offers up the possibility that after having attended Mayhew for so long, Folsom felt like a foreigner in returning to the Choctaw community, not to mention having to deal with her father’s illness. As if to compensate for her absence, Moore affirms her connection to her school in the next line by sending love to “Mrs. K and little Dorras, and Mr. Byington [Cyrus Byington of the ABCFM] if he is there,” as well as
inquiring “How does Susan get along in serving her Savior,” presumably referring to a fellow student.

Moore’s second letter from May 23, 1827, again when unable to return to Mayhew due to her father’s illness, illustrates her difficult attempts at learning to live in her home community, far from a known support system at Mayhew. Moore again addresses Burnham as “dear and affectionate friend” and thanks her for her “little note.”157 This suggests a correspondence between the two and also Burnham’s ongoing interest in the life of her former student. Although she is concerned about her family, Moore once again shows her connection to Burnham and her classmates, despairing that “I have no Miss Burnham to go to. I am so lost. I have got no Christian friends to talk with.” She also asks that Burnham “pray for my sister, she is very stupid indeed.” These sentences echo a comment made by Burnham in one of her reports, that upon being forced to leave Mayhew, one student said in protest “I have no Choctaw ma’a now, I have only an English ma’a.”158

This passage from Moore’s letter also highlights a few important things. One, Moore, like some of her fellow students, now distinguishes people in the community by whether or not they are Christians. Two, by making these distinctions and by also being away at school for so long, isolated from her community, Moore is no longer able to fully function when she returns home. This seems to have been common among a few students and defeated the original purpose of teaching the girls so that they could in turn teach their people. To Burnham, Moore’s letter would likely have been distressing proof of the necessity of keeping the students at the school. It seems that Moore was still trying to

157 Susannah Moore to Anna Burnham, May 23, 1827, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4, 237.
158 Anna Burnham, Choctaw Missions, Report of Mayhew Girls’ School, July 1, 1825, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4.
reconcile being away from her friends, and she seems resigned to this state when she writes to Burnham, “I will long remember your kindness to me, I feel very unwell this evening.”

The idea that students like Moore could be successful “hybrids” of their school system, able to return to live among the Choctaw after being educated at schools like Mayhew, was difficult in practice. To missionaries like Burnham, there was less of a possibility of these students becoming successful navigators of both cultures; they would need to convert and fully assimilate to survive. Moore’s letter demonstrates that for some students, neither of these situations was possible. Moore’s ability to negotiate both of her worlds was hampered by isolation from her community and presumably tensions among her non-Christian family. Her letter differs quite markedly from the public address she gave to the Choctaw Council, in which she reasserted her role as still very much a Choctaw girl, but one who was being educated. Moore’s articulation of disillusionment and sadness in this letter clearly show the differences between public and private letters. In refusing to hide her feelings, Moore not only exposes the flaws within the educational system, but also finds a way to convey her emotions.

While Moore used correspondence to reveal her alienation at home, other students made requests to rejoin their families and reconcile their two communities. Anna Homer wrote a letter on April 16, 1827, that almost begged Burnham, “Will you be willing I ask this? Please let me go home and talk my mother about her sins. O do please let me go to my mother about God.”¹⁵⁹ These thoughts have become so distressing to Homer that she cannot even continue with her normal school chores, “When I think this I cannot wash the clothes – I thought this – she will become a Christian. O do Miss Burnham let me

¹⁵⁹ Anna Homer to Anna Burnham, April 16, 1827, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4, 237.
go.” Like Moore, Homer realizes her mother’s “sinfulness” has isolated her from the missionary community, and she wishes to alleviate this by going home and teaching her mother about God. Homer also recognizes her mother’s devaluation by the missionaries, as she writes,

But I cannot stay with my mother at her home – I do not know where I must stay. I want to stay at Mayhew – but I want to go and see my mother now. O do please to let me go – I think I must come back in about 2 weeks, if you are willing. But I cannot do any good to her – If you are willing I must go tell my parent about God.

Perhaps Homer knows she cannot stay at home because then she might not be able to return to Mayhew at all. A visit like this would have provoked disapproval in Burnham, since as one scholar notes, Mayhew acted “like the walls of a home, compound walls” that “kept out foreign influences, attractions, customs, cultures.”\textsuperscript{160} Though Homer was not the first student to return home, this letter is the only one in the collection that is so insistent upon seeing her mother and talking to her about Christianity. The letter is significant in clearly exhibiting Homer’s voice, as she notes both her reasons and her limitations in returning home. Like her fellow students, Homer recognizes the importance of Christianity in the school community. In wishing to speak specifically to her mother, Homer shows her understanding of the woman’s power in the Choctaw community, as well as Homer’s continued relationship with her mother.

Homer eventually left for home on December 25, as reported by Burnham, who remarked that Homer “Left the school and mission family with much regret and many

tears, but with a strong impression that it was her duty to go live with her mother.”

Homer expressed this sense of lament in a letter to Burnham dated February 6, 1828. In broken English, she addressed Burnham once again in a familiar manner, “Dear mother, you have take care of me this most four years and now I think that I go out to leave you.” Like her classmates Moore, Homer alludes to the common rhetoric and Christian ideology taught at school when she writes, “I hope the Lord will take care of me where I am among the wicked people, and not hear anything talked about God, only wicked words every day. Oh how my heart aches to part with my dear Christian people.” The tone of Homer’s letter is quite different from her April letter, in which she acknowledged her mother’s godlessness but also expressed an urgent desire to go home and speak with her. In choosing to embrace Christianity, perhaps Homer feels it is her duty to teach her mother the Gospel, while at the same time feeling remorse at having to leave her supportive school community.

Homer’s letter shows a connection with her mother that could not be fully erased by her isolation at the school. As a “full blood” Choctaw and also one of the oldest in her school – aged 17 in 1826 - it is interesting to speculate on the differences between Homer’s reasons for returning home. While “half blood” and well-connected students like Emily Folsom and Susannah Moore may have seemed outwardly conformist to the school’s beliefs, even Folsom’s letter shows a persistent connection to her Choctaw “countrymen.” Among all of the girls there seems to have been a strong desire to bridge their two cultures in their own ways.

161 Anna Burnham, Choctaw Missions, Report of Mayhew Girls’ School, March 5, 1828, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4, 293.
162 Anna Homer to Anna Burnham, February 6, 1828, ABCFM, 18.3.4, v. 4, 237.
Hilary Wyss suggests that by even asking to leave, a student like Homer “holds out hope that one way or another she can reconcile the various elements of her life,” trying to fulfill her obligation to both groups’ expectations through “skillful negotiation.” Homer’s request is especially important given that in 1825 Burnham reported that Homer just “began the letters and could not speak English,” showing her growing understanding of the language and outside conflicts. The comprehension of the larger community, and a sense of duty and loyalty to both communities embodies so many of the conflicts and negotiations within the Mayhew girls’ letters.

The young women at Mayhew were stuck between two worlds, and we are able to see this quite clearly by analyzing their letters within the context in which they lived. While their letters to outside sponsors and groups like the Choctaw Council present a carefully constructed view of the school, they do not fail to show hints of the girls’ personal struggles, triumphs and underlying issues at home or in their community. The girls’ letters to their teacher are more personal, and show the bond that the girls shared with Burnham and their school as well as the ties that brought them back home. In almost all of these letters, the girls appear to be in limbo. They effectively use the maternal, domestic language taught to them by their teacher, and yet they also frequently engage in contradictory language, making excuses for themselves, expressing anxiety in their faith and revealing aspects of their personal lives. The letters become literal places where the girls can actively negotiate their cultural and physical spaces, and the intense and confusing emotions that they experienced as young women separated from their homes and now occupying two very different communities.

164 Anna Burnham, Choctaw Missions, Report of Mayhew Girls’ School, July 1, 1825, 18.3.4, v. 4.
Conclusion

Taken side by side, Anna Burnham’s school reports and her students’ letters offer a rare glimpse into assimilation at a mission school during a rapidly changing time in American history. Burnham’s reports provide a view of the daily life at the Mayhew Mission School, and more importantly, how she adopted a maternal role in teaching her students dual values of domesticity and religion. Although her role did not extend to helping Choctaw women, Burnham’s focus on solely teaching and caring for the girls preceded the activities of philanthropist women helping poor and indigenous women in the late nineteenth century. This would come to be known as “women’s work for women” and in certain circumstances, maternal colonialism.

Much like these later philanthropists, Burnham also upheld a very specific form of motherhood, even while she did not have children of her own. In doing so she negated the power of traditional Choctaw motherhood. Many Choctaw women, who held a valued position within their communities, understandably took issue with Burnham and her religious teachings. The complexity of these relations, along with the tensions in the larger Choctaw and missionary communities, surrounded the Choctaw children at Mayhew. Separated from their families and thrust into a laborious, completely new environment at the mission school, it is no wonder that many Mayhew students ended up leaving.

It is in the letters of the students who remained at Mayhew that we can read an intriguing negotiation of the complex cultures in which they lived. While some students, like those who had lost one or both parents, seem to have had no choice but to stay at
Mayhew, other students appear to have embraced their new roles at school. All of the students’ letters at some point express confusion, anxiety or other emotions about their religion, their families and their own academic skills, even in letters specifically written to promote the mission school. These passages in particular are examples of young girls attempting to make choices and create dual identities for themselves in the midst of many changes.

The Mayhew girls’ letters take on a much larger significance when they are compared to Choctaw education after 1830 and Native American education as a whole in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The girls’ letters were written at a time when missionary education was still considered fairly voluntary, but the school structure changed significantly after the Choctaws moved to Oklahoma. The increased focus on educating girls, something that was decided upon at Mayhew, clearly influenced later decisions by the Choctaw Council. By the 1840s, for example, the Council built four female seminaries in Oklahoma, and the Choctaw became known as the “model nation” for education among the “Five Civilized Tribes.” Stricter boarding schools were also built in response to what the Choctaws perceived as the failure of the earlier mission schools. After the Civil War, the entire nature of Native American schools changed, with the establishment of more gender segregated boarding schools to solve the so-called “Indian problem.” More single women teachers were also hired to teach Native American students, and many fully exercised the ideology of maternal imperialism.

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There is a wealth of documentation from this post-1830 period in Choctaw education, including several student letters. If I had more time, I would have liked to see how the Mayhew letters compared with Choctaw student letters from the 1830s or 1840s in Oklahoma; if they raised as many interesting questions, particularly about race and class among the girls; and how female education differed between the pre- and post-removal years.

For this project, however, I found the Mayhew letters from the few years in the 1820s to be extraordinarily compelling. The letters are unique not only in their content and composition, but also because of the time period in which they were written. The letters fall on the cusp of a period of rapid change and tension for the Choctaw people, and the Mayhew girls demonstrate the ways in which students from early mission schools dealt with the effects of being placed in between two very different cultures.
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