

REVEREND STEPHEN FOREMAN FATHER OF OKLAHOMA EDUCATION

In the process of relating historical incidents that occurred or the activities of past prominent citizens, events regarding culture or education are frequently overlooked. In fact, in the 1800s education was a high priority with the pioneers of Northeastern Oklahoma, and its foremost proponent and ultimately the first superintendent, was Reverend Stephen Foreman. One of 12 children, Stephen was born near Rome, Georgia on October 22, 1807. Foreman's father Anthony was Scotch and his mother Elizabeth was Cherokee. He first attended grade school in 1815 and later, as a young adult, studied with Reverend Samuel Worcester a stalwart supporter of the Cherokee Nation in Georgia. In 1831 Foreman attended Princeton Theological Seminary and in 1832 returned to teach and preach in Georgia.

Formal education was a priority among the Cherokees, Sequoyah had developed an alphabet in 1821, the Nation had approved a constitution that encouraged the development of an education system in 1827 and initiated a national newspaper, *The Cherokee Phoenix*, in 1828. Unfortunately, these early efforts toward literacy were thwarted by the series of events that followed and ultimately led to their removal to Indian Territory. For several years before the removal, Foreman had both taught and preached at the Candy Creek Mission and gained considerable stature within the Nation. When removal was forced upon the Cherokees, General Winfield Scott was placed in charge, and among others, he requested Foreman's assistance in administering to those removed to the stockades.

Upon arrival in Indian Territory in 1839, Foreman built a substantial home at Park Hill five miles south of what would become Tahlequah, the new capitol for the designated Cherokee Territory. In 1840, the leadership developed a constitution that included a framework for a system of common schools. The system was patterned after one that placed children in grades according to their age, originally designed for Massachusetts by Horace Mann in 1839. Because of his previous experience and general popularity, Stephen Foreman was chosen as superintendent of the school system, the first west of the Mississippi River.

Foreman immediately set to work organizing grade schools throughout the Cherokee Nation. He was charged with employing competent teachers, defining the curriculum and prescribing books. Each school was to serve no less than 25 students or more than 60. Orphans were to attend at the expense of the Cherokee Nation. The superintendent was to be paid \$300 annually and each school was allocated \$535, to support a teacher and provide supplies. The curriculum included reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, English, grammar, history and, in some instances, bookkeeping. By July of 1843 Foreman reported to authorities that the Nation had been divided into districts with two schools each in the Delaware, Going Snake and Flint districts and one school each in the Skin, Bayou, Illinois, Canadian, Tahlequah and Saline districts. Over 400 students were being taught by white, men teachers most of whom were from northern states, although two were Cherokee.

Just as the Cherokees seemed to be progressing as a nation in 1845 the old animosities regarding the conditions of removal flared up until finally resolved a couple of years later, but delaying further development of the education program. Finally, during May of 1851, male and female seminaries opened for older students. Under Foreman's direction, teachers for these seminaries had been secured from some of the best colleges in the east. Portions of what was regarded as a curriculum for teen agers would be considered only in advanced placement classes today. Among others, Intellectual Philosophy, the theory of perception; The Greek Language; compositions of Virgil, an ancient Roman poet; and Xenophon's Anabasis, a Greek scholar who recorded General Cyrus' expedition against his brother in 401 BC.

By the outbreak of the Civil War thirty common schools had been opened, but like the nation, the school system was thrown into chaos. Foreman, a self-proclaimed supporter of the southern cause, eventually fled to Texas. Upon returning following the war and despite the chaotic conditions, by 1877, he had reopened or established 75 schools. But the ravages of war, as well as age, had taken its toll. Reverend Stephen Foreman died December 8, 1881 and was buried in the Park Hill Cemetery.

Like so many events involving Oklahoma history, the state's school system, first west of the Mississippi, originated in Northeastern Oklahoma. Today, well over 500 school districts in the state mirror Foreman's efforts in the 1840s, certainly earning him the title of Father of Oklahoma Education.

