



Dissertation Abstract

The Charity Hall Mission: An 1820s Boarding School for Native American Children in the Chickasaw Nation

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This study focuses primarily on the historical and archaeological investigations of Charity Hall, a Christian mission school that operated within the Chickasaw Nation in northeastern Mississippi between 1820 and 1830. This school and others during this time were funded by the United States government through the 1819 Civilization Fund Act, so I argue that these stations served as outposts for American colonialism before the federal government shifted its Indian policy to one of removal. Additionally, I argue that it is impossible to adequately understand the operation of individual mission schools apart from their networks, which I theorize here as “missionscapes.” The historic component also, therefore, focuses on a broader missionscape that encompassed both the Chickasaw Nation and the neighboring Choctaw Nation during the 1820s and 1830s. More precisely, the historical and archaeological data marshalled here are presented to answer my primary research question: what material tools and practices did missionaries use to “civilize” Native American children and their families prior to Indian removal?

One of the chief ways that Chickasaw and Choctaw children were being “civilized” by the missionaries at Charity Hall was through the use of material culture. Their lives were regimented around an alien work schedule, they were clothed in materials procured by charitable societies, and they sat around a dinner table with ceramic and metal implements produced in faraway places, some coming all the way from east Asia. The pastors used practical mastery of both educational and mechanical “arts” to civilize the children in accordance with the wishes of the United States government. Here processes of practice and materiality took on a colonial character due to their being encouraged and enforced in a context where the balance of power was shifting from the Indians to the Americans. The American elites found the Christian missionaries to be ready-made agents to “civilize” Indians and spread political influence internally within both the Chickasaw Nation and the Choctaw Nation. The mission experience, however, ultimately proved to be too costly and slow and therefore paved the way for the removal policies of the 1830s and the abandonment of the “civilization” project altogether.

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