Oliver Porter Stark

by

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Biography of Oliver Porter Stark

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In 1838, William Fields, a Choctaw Indian, built the first home on property that later became the Goodland Presbyterian Children's Home, located in present day Goodland, Choctaw County, Oklahoma. In the same year, William persuaded Rev. Cyrus Kingsbury, a Presbyterian minister, to establish the Yakni Achukma Mission (Choctaw words meaning Good Land) in the area allotted by the United States Government to the Indians which became known as the Choctaw Nation, Indian Territory.

In 1848, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, a Presbyterian and Congregational organization, recognized the need for a permanent missionary to Good Land and assigned Rev. and Mrs. John Lathrop to this mission station. John Lathrop built the first structure, a two-room log manse, but after one year of service, Rev. Lathrop requested reassignment. As they returned home in 1850, the Rev. Oliver Porter Stark and his wife were assigned to Good Land and arrived in the fall of that year.

Upon their arrival, Mrs. Stark began teaching any Choctaw children who would come to their two room log manse vacated by the Rev. Lathrop and his wife. Little did the Starks know, back then, that what began as a small teaching venture would grow and blossom into a respected children's home, where, for many decades, Choctaw Indian children who had no parents received food, shelter, housing, education, and love, and which eventually opened its doors to children of all races. A home that celebrated its 150th anniversary on April 15, 2000.

Rev. Oliver Porter Stark was born August 8, 1822 in Newburgh, Orange County, New York. He was the son of Nathan Stark and his first wife, Mary Porter. About 1820, Oliver's father removed from Lyme, New London County, Connecticut, to Newburgh, where he married Mary Porter November 14, 1821. Oliver's Grandfather was also named Nathan Stark, who married Rebecca Palmer in 1784. This branch of the Stark family had been living continuously in New London County since 1637, the year the family patriarch, Aaron Stark [1608 - 1685] was recorded as a participant in the Pequot Indian War that started in May of that same year, Aaron having arrived in New England from Scotland sometime between 1630 and 1635.

Oliver was ordained a Presbyterian minister, most likely in New York State, and became a missionary, assigned about 1847 to the Choctaw Nation, Indian Territory. Probably in the same year, or just before, he married Margaret Olivia Selfridge, formerly of Allentown, Lehigh County, Pennsylvania, who had been assigned to the mission as a teacher. In 1850, Rev. Lathrop of Goodland Mission requested reassignment and Rev. Cyrus Kingsbury chose Oliver as his replacement. The day after their arrival, Olivia began to teach the Indian children in one room of the two room log Manse built by Rev. Lathrop. Within two years, the number of children being educated grew to 40 and during this time, Oliver served as a Presbyterian missionary and established a church.

Oliver and Olivia had four known children, only two documented as living in the 1860 census. Mary B. Stark was born about 1850 and Frances L. "Fannie" Stark was born about 1851, both born at the Goodland Mission. Olivia continued to teach the children until her health failed and a young lady named "Miss Norris" was sent to Goodland to continue Mrs. Stark's work. Miss Norris resigned in 1853 and was followed by Miss Harriet Mc Cormic, formerly residing in Mt. Pleasant. Olivia became pregnant early in 1854, and died September 15, 1854 from complications of child birth and the unnamed infant, a daughter, died shortly thereafter on September 30, 1854. Both Mother and child were buried in the Goodland Cemetery, these being the first interred in this cemetery. Soon after, Oliver married the school teacher, Harriet Mc Cormic. In 1854, Oliver Stark, reporting to Colonel Cooper, Choctaw Agent, stationed at Fort Towson, wrote about the school:

"In this neighborhood, and also at Bok Chito there are regular day schools embracing about 70 pupils. This (1854) is the fifth year since commencement of the school at this place. That it has been the means of accomplishing much good, there can be no doubt. The fruits of it are apparent all around us. It has been taught the past year by Miss Harriet Mc Cormic, formerly of Mount Pleasant. There are discouragements peculiar to neighborhood schools, such as more or less irregularity in attendance, ignorance of the English language on the part of the pupils, want of a disposition among parents to supply their children with books, etc. There are difficulties such as we should expect to meet with: but time and perseverance will overcome them."

"The prospects for the future are more encouraging, we think, than they have been. The number of scholars the coming year, we have reason to believe, will be larger. The school at Bok Chito was opened last spring (1854) by Rev. J. E. Dwight, a native licentiate preacher. Mr. Dwight is a liberally educated man and has had no little experience in teaching."
Oliver Porter Stark

Children born to Oliver and Harriet before 1860 were sons named Cyrus Kingsbury Stark, born July 2, 1857, and Nathan Henry Stark, born in April of 1859. [5][7] Cyrus was given the name of the first missionary to arrive in the Choctaw Nation and Nathan received the name of his grandfather.

In 1859, Oliver wrote another report on the conditions at Goodland. [5a]

Dear Sir:

I herewith transmit you a report of the missionary station at Goodland for the past year.

There is nothing of special importance to communicate in regard to our work as missionaries. Our prospects are as encouraging as they have ever been and more so than at this time last year.

The minds of our people were then very much disturbed by their political difficulties, and we felt that there was but little of law or order among us. This state of things has passed away, as we hope, forever. We preach to large and attentive audiences, and have reason to believe that these efforts to interest and save the souls of those to whom we preach, are not in vain. Ten have been received to the church, on profession of their faith, during the year. The whole number is about 275. We have collected, for benevolent and church purposes, $75.

The day school at this place has been taught, as formerly, by Miss Mary Greenlee. It continues to prosper: the attendance having been as large as at any time since its commencement, and more regular. The school at Bokchito is still discontinued no provision having been made for it in time to secure the services of a teacher.

Our people, we think, are steadily improving in habits of industry. More was done last winter and spring, than ever before, in the way of enlarging fields and planting them; and had the season been favorable, the corn crop would have been unusually large. The late dry weather has disappointed our expectations; but we think there will still be enough for necessary purposes.

Our neighborhood borders on Red River, where liquor establishments are to be found within a few miles of each other, and during the fall and winter, intemperance prevailed to an alarming extent. Six men have come to violent deaths during the year from this cause. All but one were heads of families, and have left that many widows and 23 half orphan children. These evils are greatly to be deplored, and call for the interposition of some strong arm. I am gratified in being able to say, that for a few months, through the efficiency of faithful officers, a different state of things has existed. We hope that the time is not far distant when public opinion in Texas will become powerful enough to abolish these sources of so much misery and loss of precious life to this people.

Very respectfully yours,

O. P. Stark

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The Presbyterian Churches, during the tumultuous years before the Civil War, did not explicitly divide on the issue of slavery. However, there were Old School - New School congregations formed in 1837 which has been regarded by some historians as the first ecclesiastical North - South separation of the Presbyterian Church. The Old School Presbyterians were able to dominate because most of their strength lay in that third of its membership from the deep South, while the minority New School claimed most of the Presbyterians who were leading the "evangelical united front" in the North. By suppressing official discussion of the slavery issue, the Old School avoided schism until the secession crisis of 1860. [6] When the Choctaw, Chickasaws, and Cherokees declared with the South, the Choctaw Nation missionaries from the northern tier of States faced a moral dilemma, for many did not approve of the institution of slavery. However, because they had lived among and educated the Indians for many years, they chose not to abandon their spiritual needs, the missionaries decision to stay during the conflict considered treasonous by their relatives living in the north.

In 1861, the Presbyterian Church of the Confederate States of America was formed and the General Assembly met in Montgomery, Alabama May 1, 1862. The committee, upon application made, appointed Rev. Cyrus Kingsbury, D. D., Rev. Messrs. Cyrus Byington, Ebenezer Hotchin, C. C. Copeland, Oliver P. Stark, Alexander Reid, Pliny Fisk, preachers to the Cherokee Mission. Minutes from the Assembly related, "All those above named have been engaged in the Missionary work from periods varying from five to forty years. Most of them are now known to our churches, and all of them, the Committee have reason to believe, are true and good men, and are entitled to the full confidence of the Churches. All of these brethren have been reappointed to the stations they have heretofore occupied...." [10]

The General Assembly minutes reported; "Mr. Stark reports the membership at Goodland Church at two hundred. He (Oliver Stark) writes: The number added during the year has been seven—six on examination and one by letter. There has been, and still is a good degree of seriousness, and some are indulging a hope that have not yet been received to the communion of the Church. We have on Wednesday afternoon a prayer meeting, the special object of which is to supplicate God's blessing upon our soldiers, and upon our country." [10]
The committee discussed the war's possible affects on the Indians in the Confederacy. The Choctaw Nation report, prepared by Oliver Stark appeared in the minutes. The committee reported; "Mr. Stark visited the Choctaw regiments at their encampment in the Cherokee country the latter part of January, and gives a good account of their general deportment, especially of that of the members of the Church. He supposes there were 1,600 Choctaws in the encampment, and about one-sixth of these were professing Christians, some of whom were the best and most prominent men of the nation. He (Oliver Stark) writes: 'Prayer and praise went up every evening from around many of the camp fires.' And he (Oliver Stark) adds that the captain of the company with whom he lodged allowed no drinking, swearing, gambling or Sabbath breaking among his men; and indeed he had seen and heard of very little of these vices among any of the soldiers." [10]

At the beginning of the Civil War, T. H. Hadden, son of H. B. Hadden, traveling with his father, sister, and Mr. Hamil, took a trip from Paris to Doaksville, Choctaw Nation, visiting with friends they knew before moving to Paris. On returning from Doaksville, they stopped for the night at Goodland, staying at the home of Oliver Stark. A war council was being held that night and according to young Hadden, the Indians were under the influence of gin.

The proceedings started with an Indian beating a bass drum sitting next to the flag pole joined by another drum off to the west. Upon hearing the second drum, some of the Indians mounted their horses and rode off in that direction, from which the Indians could be heard shouting, sounding like Turkeys gobbling, according to young Hadden. After a time, the drums and Indians came from every direction and the young men performed a war dance, painting themselves with red war paint and jumping, kicking, twisting, and turning as they danced around the man with a drum. This was followed by the squaws entering the circle, carrying guns, facing inward, chanting a melody. [12]

Kate Stark, born in October of 1860, Elizabeth "Lizzie" Stark, born July 24, 1863, and Helen Stark, born December 12, 1866, were born in the Choctaw Nation during the early to mid 1860s. [11] This region, located just north of the Red River, saw considerable lawlessness and mayhem during and immediately after the Civil War, which closed most of the schools for the duration. At the conclusion of the war, the Presbyterian Churches of the now United States, continued to be greatly divided and the conditions at Goodland prompted Rev. Stark to request reassignment to Paris, Lamar County, Texas, located about 30 miles south of Goodland and the Red River.

Rev. Stark started construction of a building which was to become the Lamar Female Seminary, located at #32 26th Street in Paris, which opened and began classes late in 1866. This building was not only the home of Oliver and Harriet, but housed teachers, support employees, and some students who could not commute daily from their homes. Born before 1870 at the seminary to Rev. & Mrs. Harriet Stark was their daughter, Ida Stark, probably born in March of 1868, [10] and sons Oliver P. Stark, Jr. and William B. Stark, born in September of 1870 and about 1872, respectively. [13]

In 1861, the Old School Presbyterian Church of Paris had been organized, the name implying the congregation identified with the above mentioned Old School Presbyterians. [14] However, the Civil War interrupted its growth and the membership became scattered. The Presbyterian Churches of the United States were once again united by 1872 and several new Presbyterian families had settled in Paris by 1871. On April 2nd, several members of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, one of them being Mrs. Harriet M. Stark, requested at the Presbytery of Eastern Texas Assembly, approval to organize a Presbyterian Church in Paris. The Assembly, moderated by Rev. R. E. Sherrill, approved the formation of this new church and Rev. Sherrill provided occasional preaching to the newly created church for the remainder of 1871. The records of the First Presbyterian Church of Paris, compiled by Marie Jenkins Moore in October of 1985, revealed Rev. Stark was to be given a large amount of credit for the establishment and organization of the church during its infant years.


Rev. Stark sold the Lamar Female Seminary to J. D. Anderson in 1880 and returned to the Spencer Academy, Choctaw Nation,
Oliver Porter Stark
teaching there until his death at that place April 2, 1884. His place of burial, some have related, was Spencer Academy, while others have said he was interred at Goodland. However, May 19, 2005, Dennis Lee, resident of Paris, Texas, visited Evergreen Cemetery near Paris, and found a stone which has inscribed, "In Memory of Oliver P. Stark, Born at Newburg, N. Y., Died at Spencer Academy, April 2, 1884, at 62 years." Dennis then reviewed the Evergreen Cemetery Records for Internments and found Rev. Oliver P. Stark was buried April 12, 1884, ten days after he died at the Spenser Academy. (See Photo below)

Harriet may have moved back to Paris after the death of Oliver, for she was recorded in the 1900 and 1910 census for Paris, living in the home of her daughter, Kate (Stark) Skinner, head of the house and a widow in 1900. Harriet died October 3, 1910, at the home of her daughter, and was buried in the Evergreen Cemetery between Oliver and her son, Nathan Henry Stark. Cyrus Kingsbury Stark, who died in 1879, was the first buried in the Stark Plot, his gravesite located on the other side of Nathan.

[15][See Photos below]
Oliver Porter Stark

All of the Photos in this biography were contributed by Dennis Lee, resident of Paris, Texas. The following cemetery photos, taken in May of 2005, are from the Evergreen Cemetery near Paris.

Tombstone, Oliver P. Stark.

Harriet McCormic Stark Tombstone

Nathan Henry Stark Tombstone

Cyrus Kingsbury Stark Tombstone

Oliver P. Stark Family Cemetery Plot
Rev. Oliver P. Stark was a Presbyterian minister, born in New York State. He labored for many years as a missionary among the Choctaw Indians, and afterwards founded the Lamar Female Seminary at Paris, Tex., where he remained until his death in 1884.