

Iti Fabvssa – Remembering and Searching for “Wheelock – In song and story”

In the June edition of Iti Fabvssa, we ran an oral history guide to help you start conversations with your family and friends with the aim to record and save those stories for future generations. While stories are important for all people, the stories that Choctaw people tell about our past remind us of the sacrifices that our ancestors made to ensure the survival of our culture, language, and community. One subject of many Choctaw stories is Wheelock Female Academy, an all-girls boarding school founded in 1832 by missionary Alfred Wright that educated hundreds of Choctaw and native girls until 1952. Wheelock was also where Choctaw girls were separated from family and the teachings, language, and culture they would have been exposed to at home. It was also an important site of new kinds of remembering the legacy of our Choctaw ancestors and Wheelock Academy students like Ida Austin and Betty Whitfield carried these stories into the lives of their descendants.

Wheelock has been important to the family of Sandra Moore Riley and her daughter Margaret Riley, the descendants of Ida Austin and Betty Whitfield, for at least five generations. For more than fifty years, Sandra has researched Choctaw history and helped families learn their genealogy. Both Sandra and Margaret actively participate in Choctaw textile revitalization and are skilled artists. Through their retelling of their family connections to Wheelock Academy, Sandra and Margaret shared with us how Betty’s stories prompted a 50-year long search for information about a play performed at Wheelock. Their journey reminds us that that telling Choctaw stories and experiences to the next generation is part of a legacy of maintaining Choctaw lifeways and our connection to our ancestors.

From her home in Connecticut, Margaret helped Sandra, who lives in Texas, to record Betty’s story. Sandra’s mother went by ‘Betty’ since she was a girl even though her given name was Phoebe Frances Whitfield. Sandra recalls, “Throughout my childhood in California, Mother told me stories about Wheelock Academy, the Choctaw boarding school that she, her sisters, and her mother attended.” Margaret and her mother Sandra speak fondly of Betty’s Wheelock stories of exploring the woods near the school and remembering how, “Once in a while, we could get her to sing ‘Glowworm’ and perform a few steps of the routine she’d done as a schoolgirl.” Margaret’s three children have grown up outside of Choctaw Nation but have visited Wheelock multiple times. When she asks her children about Wheelock, they remember that “[Betty] eventually ran away and followed the train tracks home. Even though she appreciated what she was learning at Wheelock, it was a boarding school, after all, and she missed her mother.”

One of the stories Betty often told was of a pageant she witnessed at Wheelock. Sandra recalls that her mother would describe how, “the players rode in on wagons, reenacting their arrival over the Trail of Tears from Mississippi.” Sandra shares that, “Over the years, Mother’s stories about the pageant remained vivid in my memory... After she retired from her teaching career in California, Mother returned to southeastern Oklahoma. When I went to see her, we often visited her old friends and I asked them if they knew anything about the pageant at Wheelock.”

Held in the early 1930’s, the Wheelock Academy pageant that Sandra’s mother remembered was likely organized to commemorate the centennial of both the Trail of Tears and Alfred Wright’s founding of Wheelock. Edmond J. Gardner, a local historian of Valliant, worked with others to

coordinate and present the Wheelock pageant to the community. On one of her visits to Oklahoma in the 1970's, Sandra met Noel Gardner, Edmond Gardner's son, whom she also asked about the Wheelock pageant. While she learned there was a written description of the pageant in Edmond's papers, they had been loaned to a historical society. On other occasions, Sandra met with Annie Garland Haynie who attended Wheelock reunions and lived near the Academy. While Annie was also a keeper of many family stories and collections, she too was not able to shed light on the pageant.

Sandra continued her search for records of the pageant. She remembers that, "Over many years and many conversations with area historians, I was never able to find anything more about the pageant my mother had described." For more than fifty years, Sandra shared her mother's pageant story while continuing her Choctaw historical and genealogical research in the community and in archives. Finally, in January 2020, Sandra found for the missing details of her mother's Wheelock pageant story in the Gardner family papers, part of the Gilcrease Museum archives in Tulsa.

Reflecting on that research trip to the archives, Sandra shared her reaction to the discovery:

I was absolutely thrilled to learn they had a very large collection of Edmond Gardner's papers. The description of the pageant was there, complete with a diagram showing the staging! [...] Just like mother described. My Mother started school at Wheelock about one hundred years ago. It seems fitting that I found the papers this year to mark that anniversary.

Gardner's pageant included four scenes spanning from late 1700's Choctaw home life through the Trail of Tears, ending with the early years at Wheelock and Alfred Wright's passing. The crowd witnessed dramatizations of negotiations between Choctaw leaders and the US government including key figures like Pushmataha, Thomas Leflore, Andrew Jackson, Greenwood Leflore, Major Eaton, and Killihota and the meetings at Doak's Stand and Dancing Rabbit Creek. The script, entitled "Wheelock – In song and story" includes dialogue like the following representing conversations at the negotiations for the Treaty of Doak's Stand in 1820 (the transcription uses the notation from the archive, Pushmataha is sometimes referred to as Push):

Brother Push. "I know that a line running due south from the Canadian source would not touch [the] Red River but go into Mexican possessions."

General Jackson. Interrupts Pushmataha. by saying. "See here [brother] Push look at this map

Both examine the map.

Pushmataha. Says. "The map is not true." Then marks out a map on the ground...

In the stage directions, Gardner recommends that, "The girls should act out as many of the scenes as [possible], because they could be properly trained and instructed, and let the visiting Choctaws serve as fillers to make a crowd." Sandra's mother most remembered the procession of wagons that reenacted the Trail of Tears journey during the pageant. Gardner's stage directions called for

at least twenty-five consecutive groups of people on foot, horseback, or wagons to portray the removal by riding through the Wheelock grounds and playing out short anecdotes from the Trail. It is no wonder that Sandra's mother Betty passionately recounted witnessing the pageant as a girl many decades later.

While oral histories are valid by themselves, these archival records reveal the grand scale of the event and attest to the deep impact of removal on Choctaw people, as played out in this 1932 pageant. By sharing these stories from generation to generation and caring for the heritage materials of families and communities, Choctaw people like Sandra Moore Riley and Margaret Riley, Edmond Gardner and Noel Gardner, preserve a record of the stories that continue to be relevant to understanding our Choctaw history. For Margaret, she hopes "that future generations of our family will appreciate how important Wheelock Academy was to my grandmother. I hope they have the chance to walk down the front walk and imagine her roller skating, playing jacks, or singing Glowworm." These stories, both great and small, carry significance in the act of retelling and in affirming the way our ancestors played active roles in shaping the Choctaw future.

We encourage you to continue the important work of sharing intergenerational stories. For questions about the Wheelock Academy Historic Site or for contact information for Historic Preservation staff, please visit www.choctawnationculture.com.

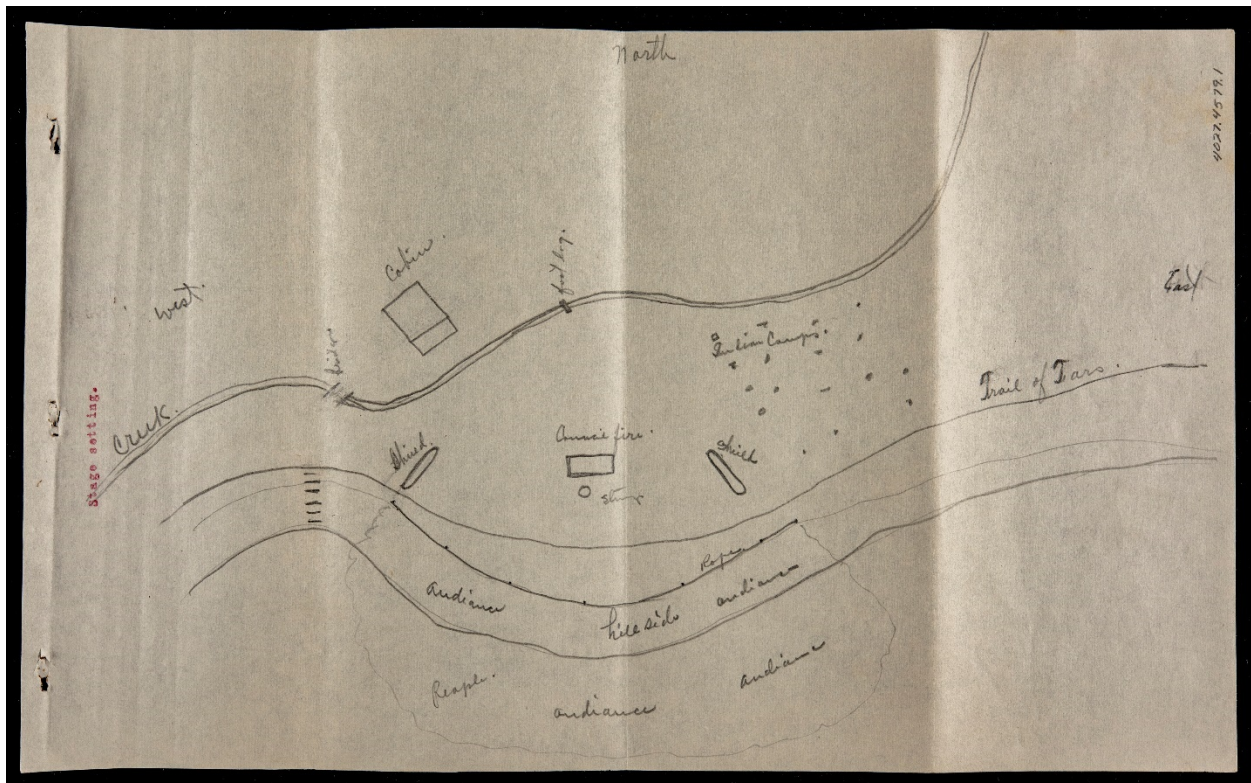


Diagram of pageant staging on Wheelock grounds, signed by Edmund J. Gardner, ink and pencil on paper, Choctaw, mid-20th century. 4027.4572-.12 Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma



Photograph circa 1930 of Wheelock students and friends Betty Whitfield (mother of Sandra Moore Riley) on right and Lucy Walker on left. Provided by Sandra Moore Riley.