

ROSS, ELIZABETH

MORAVIAN MISSIONS

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Moravian Missions at Oaks
and Woodmount.
September 1, 1937

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Moravian missionaries journeyed west at the time of the Cherokee removal from beyond the Mississippi river in 1838. A temporary location was made near the Barren Fork in the vicinity of Tyner Creek, and somewhat later a site for a station was selected at Beattie's Prairie. The permanent station was established at Oaks, some twenty miles north of Tahlequah, Cherokee Nation, Indian Territory.

The act of the Cherokee National Council granting permission to the Moravian Board to establish a missionary station was as follows:

"Be it enacted by the National Council, that permission be and is hereby granted to the Board of the Moravian Society at Salem, North Carolina, to erect a missionary station near the head of Spring Creek, on the military road, in this Nation, for the purpose of carrying on their labors in the instruction and improvement of the Cherokee people.

"Tahlequah, November 24, 1842.
Approved: John Ross."

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Necessary buildings were constructed and church and school work was begun within a comparatively brief period following the passage of the act of the Council and its approval by the Principal Chief.

This work continued without interruption until near the outbreak of the Civil War. In the beginning of the conflict the minister in charge of the mission was the Rev. Gilbert Bishop. Conditions became very troublesome. The Reverend James Ward, of Cherokee nationality, who was connected with the mission, was slain by a party of Cherokee Indians, and the missionary activities disrupted. Superintendent Bishop returned to Pennsylvania, and the mission was abandoned until the return of peace.

The first missionary to resume work among the Cherokees following the close of the war was Reverend Edwin J. Mack, who reached the station at Oaks before the close of the year of 1866. Preaching services were regularly observed and school work was resumed.

Also connected with the mission, which was called the new Spring Place Mission, was Reverend Theodore M. Rights, a native of Freidburg, North Carolina.

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Following the close of the Civil war, by several years, a station called Woodmount, a short distance south of Tahlequah, had been placed in operation, and at this place the Reverend Mr. Rights, who arrived in 1872, was stationed for awhile and a large church was built. After a rather brief period the Reverend Mr. Rights was sent to New Spring Place. Reverend Edwin J. Mack retired and the Reverend Joseph Hillman was stationed at Woodmount.

In 1896 Reverend Rights discontinued work at Woodmount church and with his family returned to Pennsylvania.

During the early nineties the parents of Reverend Rights and Mrs. J. Benjamin Leinbach visited their son and daughter at Tahlequah and at New Spring Place, respectively. While at the home of his son, at Woodmount, Mr. Rights, Senior, passed away. Desiring to bury the aged father at New Spring Place, some twenty-five miles northwest of Tahlequah, the body was placed in a farm wagon and the journey was begun. A deep snow had fallen, making the rugged road even more unsuitable to travel. A pathetic incident occurred. The wagon containing the corpse overturned but re-adjustment was made, and the party continued on their way, reaching

their destination late in the night. Mrs. Rights, wife of Mr. Rights, Senior, is also buried at the same place.

The Reverend Mr. Hillman decided to remove the church building to Tahlequah, where the structure was ultimately acquired by the Presbyterian congregation, and the Woodmount station was without a church until some time after the return to that station of the Reverend Mr. Rights, who, in 1886, succeeded in having a new church built, with funds contributed by church members and others, and by the Moravian Board.

Connected with the New Spring Place Mission for some time after the return of the Reverend T. M. Rights to Woodmount station was the Reverend J. Benjamin Leinbach. For sometime the buildings and property were in the care of persons selected by those having authority.

The Moravians were the first Protestant missionaries to begin work among the Cherokees in their original country east of the Mississippi River; and their oldest and most well-known station was that known as Spring

Place Mission in Georgia. It was for this historic station that New Spring Place Mission in Indian Territory was named. But during many years of effort both in the old and the new Cherokee Nations, the membership was never very large, and soon after the beginning of the last decade of the nineteenth century the missionary board began considering withdrawal from the mission field in the Indian Territory; about the middle of the decade announcement was made that the Moravian denomination had withdrawn from further missionary activity.

The Mission buildings and property passed into ownership of the others. Near the vicinity of the old station at Oaks the graves and tombstones of several of the early day preachers and teachers may be seen. The property at Oaks is now (1937) owned by the Lutheran denomination.

Authorities: Moravian historical notes; Laws of the Cherokee Nation, printed in 1867.

Personal recollections.