'A Great Gathering of Wondering;' The Spiritual Intersections of Indigenous and African Persons in the Early Baptist Church

It began in the old country where persons of African descent and indigenous persons in the new world first began to worship together. Missionaries from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel wrote into their very mission statement that their intent was to "do missionary work among the heathen, especially the Indians and the Negroes." [1] In those days, enslavement was a complex and multiracial endeavor and the S.P.G. missionaries in the Carolinas, Georgia, and Virginia worked among both "Indian and Negro Slaves." Francis LeJau set about his work in earnest… "I design with God's blessing to have a day in the week for the instruction of poor Indians and Negroes, their masters like it well most of them"[2] and met with some small success, "after our Divine Service invited the Negro and Indian Slaves to stay for half an hour, the Invitation to my Great comfort has been joyfully received by about 50 of them."[3] Le Jau began to meet with some small success, yet he still faced grave challenges even to the point of his near exasperation,

> Many Negroes and Indian Slaves are actually instructed and Tryal in order to be admitted to the Holy Baptism. I had appointed a day in the Week for publick Catechising; I am much concern'd at the remissness of the parents and masters, but I am not discouraged…I cannot to this day prevail upon some to make a Difference between Slaves and free Indians, and Beasts, yet there are worthy persons of another Mind in this Parish, else I shou'd have little comfort in my spiritual endeavours.[4]

Thus, the seeds of a new congregation that would spring forth in the Indian Territory was first planted long before the first thoughts of relocation had ever been considered; Blacks and

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[1] Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church,* (Washington D. C.: The Associated Publishers 1921), 6.
[2] Le Jau in Klingberg, 26.
[3] Le Jau in Klingberg, 76.
[4] Le Jau in Klingberg, 53.

Indians were brought to Christianity by being washed in the same waters and sharing a common union.

In Southeastern Virginia very near the junction of two trading routes where the home of the Occaneechi Nation lie until they were removed by the rebellion of Nathanial Bacon lies the birthplace of the African-American Baptist Church. Bluestone Church, or "First African," was founded on the William Byrd plantation near the Bluestone River, in Mecklenburg, Virginia, and is traditionally regarded as the first known black church in North America. Not too far away in from Bluestone is found Elam Baptist Church of Charles City County, an area in which is found Flowerdew Hundred where indentured Africans first brought to the New World in 1619 found residence after their release from indenture. Charles City County is one of the first meeting grounds of three cultures – three cultures that became the basis of civilization in the Southeastern United States. Though we have little evidence that these first African churches were composed of persons of both African and native descent, these churches were composed of both slave and free members and the records of Virginia continually mention the "Education of Heathen Slaves" that included "every Indian, negro, or mulatto child."[5] It is worth mentioning that the historical record describes these churches as being "composed almost, if not altogether, or people of colour" and yet in the next sentence describes its pastor as "Moses, a black man."[6]

In their study entitled *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya studied the history of the black church in the United States. In their work, they made the following notation, "The oldest church in the study was the Silver Bluff Baptist Church of Beech Island, South Carolina, which on its cornerstone claimed a

[5] Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: the "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 107.
[6] Raboteau, 139.

founding date of 1750. It is generally regarded as the first known black church."[7] This place was, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a center for not only economic trade with the Five Nations, but also political and social discourse. George Galphin, the owner of the settlement, was a gregarious Irishman who had at least four wives, including Metawney, the daughter of a Creek headman, and two Africans, the "Negro Sappho" and the "Negro Mina." The area around the "Negro Baptist Church" was a region in the eighteenth century where the three races converged; members of Galphin's family were patrons of the Negro Baptist Church at Silver Bluff.[8] Silver Bluff Baptist Church was organized and pastored by David George, a free black from Southeastern Virginia who had spent many years among the Mvskoke and Natchez people.[9] Another nearby church, the First African Baptist Church of Savannah, was led a former slave by the name of Henry Francis, "whose mother was white and whose father was an Indian."[10]

There were great affinities between West African traditional religions and traditional religions of the Americas. Within traditional cultures, the existence of the sacred permeates all planes of existence; there is no clearcut distinction between the sacred and secular, the religious and the nonreligious, the spiritual and the material. Traditional societies in Africa and the Americas both emphasized the sacred power of the circle of life – both with the environment and within one's community; each stressed the importance of sacred order and the power of ritual to affect and overcome disorder; both attached great significance to kinship in their social organization; and each were rooted in a communal economy based on subsistence agriculture. In each culture, mythopoetic traditions celebrated the numerous spirits, spiritual beings, forces

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[7] C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1990), 102.

[8] J. Leitch Wright, *Creeks and Seminoles* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 81; Kathryn E. Holland Braund, *Deerskins and Duffels: Creek-Indian Trade with Anglo-America, 1685-1815 (*Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 46.

[9] Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 105.

[10] Letter of Andrew Bryan to Reverend Doctor Rippon in Milton Sernett, ed., *Afro-American Religious History: A Documentary Witness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1985), 49.

of nature, creatures both animate and inanimate, as well as fellow inhabitants within the natural environment. Among the many nations of the first peoples of Africa and the Americas, there were religious specialists who took the form of "priests," traditional healers or "shamans."

These religious leaders became the leaders of the nascent Aframerindian Baptist churches and the focus upon an all-inclusive religiousity, strong oratorical traditions, sacred song, physical forms of worship, and emotional intensity promoted a common spiritual identity among Africans and Native peoples. In addition, the brush arbor architecture that became a critical part of the "invisible institution" that lay at the center of slave religion was borrowed from the architecture of the "stomp ground" of Southeastern traditional religious practices.[11] Lastly, a tremendously powerful common denominator among Africans and Native persons of the American Southeast was their affinity for the practice of "going to water," in which the religious leader took the person to a stream to be "baptized" and thus the person emerged cleansed of impurities and ennobled for a new life.[12]

On the eve of removal, the churches of the Five Nations were composed of congregations of mixed African and native American heritage. In August 1818, a Cherokee seeking admission to the Chickamauga mission was found "able to spell correctly in words of 4 & 5 letters. He had been taught solely by black people who had received their instruction in our Sunday School."[13] Cornelia Pelham, an 1821 visitor to a mission in the Chickasaw Nation, found the mission church to be a mixed congregation:

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[11] J. Daniel Pezzoni, "Brush Arbors In The American South" *Pioneer America Society Transactions* 1997 20: 25-34.

[12] Alan Edwin.Kilpatrick, "'Going To The Water': A Structural Analysis Of Cherokee Purification Rituals," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 1991 15(4): 49-58; Alan Kilpatrick, "A Note on Cherokee Theological Concepts," *The American Indian Quarterly* 19 (June 1995): 394; Sharon A. Fife, "Baptist Indian Church: Thlewarle Mekko Sapkv Coko" *Chronicles of Oklahoma* XLVIII, (No. 4: Winter 1970 – 1971): 450-466.

[13] Chickamagua Journal quoted in H.T. Malone, *Cherokees of the Old South: A People in Transition* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1956), 142.

> About two thirds of the members of the church are of African descent; these mostly understand English; and on that account are more accessible than the Chickasaws. The black people manifest the most ardent desire for religious instruction, and often travel a great many miles to obtain it. Two or three years ago, a black man who belonged to the mission church, opened his little cabin for prayer, on the evening of every Wednesday, which was usually attended by half a dozen colored persons. This spring, the number suddenly increased, till more than fifty assembled at once, many of whom were full Indians. The meetings, were conducted wholly by Christian slaves, in the Chickasaw language.[14]

What started in the old country came forward into the new. On the "trail of tears," African Americans blazed the route to the Indian Territory: "my grandparents were helped and protected by very faithful Negro slaves who...went ahead of the wagons and killed any wild beast who came along."[15] In spite of the fact that they were given the responsibility to guard with "axes and guns" the caravans at night, few of the slaves made their escape. However, what for the Cherokee became known as "the Trail Where We Cried"[16] was for the Africans an exodus.[17] Large numbers of slaves and free Africans fled with the Cherokee and the other southern nations to Indian Territory; they realized that as rough as life on the trail could be, there could be no life for them in what was their adopted homeland.

What started in the old country continued unabated in the new land. Once in the Indian Territory; African and Native American Baptists continued to worship in old accustomed ways. From the very first Baptist Church in Oklahoma, the congregations were of mixed cultural heritage. Missionary Isaac McCoy organized the Ebenezer Baptist Church, the first Baptist church in Oklahoma, in the Mvskoke Nation on September 9, 1832. It was composed of "three blacks, two white people, and one Indian in its six charter members."[18] The founding members of the

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[14] Sarah Tuttle, *Letters from the Chickasaw and Osage Missions*, (n.p., 1921), 9-10.
[15]Nathaniel Willis, *Indian Pioneer History Collection* [microform], Grant Foreman, ed. (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma: Indian Archives Division, Oklahoma Historical Society Microfilm Publications, 1978-1981).
[16] Wilma Mankiller and Michael Wallis, *Mankiller: A Chief and Her People (*New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 46.
[17]J.M. Gaskins, History of *Black Baptists in Oklahoma*, (Oklahoma City: Messenger Press, 1992), 84; Kenneth W. Porter, "Negroes on the Southern Frontier." *Journal of Negro History* 33 (1948): 53-78; Jimmie Lewis Franklin, *The Blacks of Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 2.
[18] Jesse M. Gaskins, *Black Baptists in Oklahoma* (Oklahoma City: Messenger Press, 1992), 91. *See also* Jesse Marvin Gaskin, *Trail Blazers of Sooner Baptists* (Shawnee: Oklahoma Baptist University Press, 1953);

church were Reverend David Lewis, his wife, John Davis -- a Mvskoke, and three black members of the Mvskoke Nation by the names of Quash, Bob, and Ned.[19] Ebenezer Baptist Church conducted its first baptisms the following Sabbath, "The following Saturday, two Creeks and two Blacks were received for baptism, and on the following Sunday took place the first baptism in the Indian's Home. On the same day, under the shade of the wide-spreading, hospitable, forest trees, in the presence of a great gathering of wondering, dusky Indians, and their darker slaves, the Memorial Supper was spread, and observed in apostolic simplicity."[20] Later, the church continued to grow under the tutelage of the licensed preacher, Mr. John Davis, " On the 14th of October, thirty seven people were baptised at a meeting at the Muscogee church, eight or ten of whom were Creeks, and the rest, except one, colored persons and slaves. On the 10th of November, nine were baptized, three of whom were Indians."[21]

On October 20, 1833, Native Mvskoke minister John Davis was ordained to the Baptist ministry. Assuming the position of pastor of Ebenezer Church, he remained in this position until his death in 1839.[22] In January 1836, the church membership numbered 82 -- 6 whites, 22 Native Americans, and 54 African-Americans. An outstation of the Ebenezer Baptist Church was started some 30 miles distant, called Canadian Station. In 1839, a school was opened with fifty students at the Canadian mission with John Davis as its principal; the chief instructor at the school was a Native American Baptist minister.[23] The outpost at the Canadian River became the center of the Baptist missions among the Mvskoke Nation for the next twenty-five years.

C. W. West, *Missions and Missionaries of Indian Territory* (Muscogee: Muscogee Publishing Company, 1990); E.C. Routh, *The Story of Oklahoma Baptists* (Shawnee, Oklahoma Baptist University Press, 1932).

[19] Isaac McCoy, *History of Baptist Indian Missions (*New York: H. and S. Raynor, 1840), 426; Walter Wyeth, *Isaac McCoy: Early Indian Missions* (Philadelphia: W.N. Wyeth Publishers, 1895), 192-193; West, 21.

[20] L. W. Marks, "The Story of Oklahoma Baptists," (Unpublished Manuscript, 1912).

[21] Wyeth, 193.

[22] West, 4. John Davis was not new to the ministry having been educated at Union Mission and been in the employ of the Baptist Church since 1830. He had previously attempted to found a church under the auspices of the American Board with some thirty African American and Mvskokeans. [Angie Debo, *The Road to Disappearance* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1941),116].

[23] American Baptist Missionary Union, *The Missionary Jubilee: An Account of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the American Baptist Missionary Union at Philadelphia, May 24, 25, and 26, 1864 with Commemorative Papers and Discourses (*New York: Sheldon and Company, 1865), 477.

When Cherokee Bpatist missionaries arrived in the new territory in the West, he and his native ministers began an outreach to the disparate members of their Baptist congregations. Jones described these missions as: "friendly deputations have visited the National Convention, from the Mvskokes, Seminoles, Shawnees, Delawares, and Senecas."[24] They also described community meetings held by the brethren of their churchwho divided up several neighborhoods and "held meetings for devotional exercises." At one such meeting, "four blacks – two males and two females, were baptized on a profession of their faith in the Lord Jesus."[25]

There is no doubt that African-American Baptist ministers met many of these early delegations. Most of the earliest ministers in the Indian Territory were African-American slaves or freed slaves.[26] Though seldom credited by name, their effects were well noted, "Four black women came forward to tell what God had done for their souls. They were approved and baptized on profession of their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. There has been for several months considerable attention to religion among the Blacks on both sides of the line, principally through the instrumentality of a Black man who resides in the vicinity."[27]

Some of the black ministers were well known. Among these were Joseph Island, Old Billy, and Brother Jesse Brother Jesse worked among the Mvskoke where his efforts were often less than appreciated, "One of them came and tied another rope around my wrists; the other end was thrown over the fork of a tree, and they drew me up until my feet did not quite touch the ground, and they tied my feet together. Then they went a little way off and sat down. Afterwards one of them came and asked me where I got this new religion. I said in the Old

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[24] American Baptist Missionary Union, *Annual Report [1840]* (Boston: American Baptist Missionary Union, 1850), *9.*

[25] Evan Jones to American Baptist Missionary Union, May 28, 1844, "Correspondence of Missionaries to Native Americans, [microform], 1825-1865," American Baptist Historical Society, Rochester, N.Y.

[26] Gaskin, 90.

[27] Evan Jones to American Baptist Missionary Union, July 10, 1844, "Correspondence of Missionaries to Native Americans, [microform], 1825-1865," American Baptist Historical Society, Rochester, N.Y.

Nation. `Yes,' replied the Indian, `you have set half of this nation to praying and this is what we are going to whip you for.' Five men gave me five strokes each."[28]

Many believe that the Mvskoke were opposed to the Christian missionaries because they were concerned about the impact of the Christian mission upon their slaves.[29] However, the issue is hardly so simple. Many of the Mvskoke were not opposed to preaching to the slaves, they were opposed to preaching the Christian gospel within the Mvskoke Nation altogether. The traditionalists had consistently opposed Christianity and the Mvskokes were often seen as the most hostile to the Christian message. In addition, the Mvskoke had real reservations about Christianity because of the struggles that they saw between the French and Spanish Catholics and the English Protestants as well as the denominational struggles within the Protestants themselves. The Mvskoke wondered that if Christians could not solve their own problems, how were they to be of assistance to any one else?

Native Christians were often punished for following black ministers: "One woman who received fifty lashes for affirming her faith in Christ went down to a spring...washed her wounds, and walked ten miles to hear Joseph Islands preach that night."[30] The most famous of these black Baptist preachers was Monday Durant, "a large, strong, man, of fine physical proportions. He readily spoke the Mvskoke language, and commenced preaching when a young man."[31] Durant had been with the Mvskoke on the "trail where we cried." The blacks who fled west with the Indians "secretly held their meetings, baptizing after midnight in the streams, with guards

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[28] Brother Jesse quoted in Carl Rister, *Baptist Missions among the American Indians* (Atlanta: Southern Baptist Convention, 1944), 85.

[29] Reverend Lee Compere, an American Board minister, was expelled from the Mvskoke Nation because "Compere insisted upon preaching to the slaves of the Creeks, and their masters felt this would make them unruly." [William Gerald McLoughlin, *Champions of the Cherokees: Evan and John B. Jones* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 217].

[30] Rister, 84.

[31] Daniel Rogers, quoted in Gaskin, 104.

posted to keep from being surprised and arrested."[32] Durant worked both the Creek and Seminole Nations and founded his own church in 1854.

There is little doubt that there were African-american ministers in the Indian Territory, but were also quite accepting and even encouraging of their black brethren:

> Agreeably to the suggestion in our last Report, Mr. Jones, of the Cherokee Mission, visited the late Creek Station (Ebenezer's Canadian Mission) in September last and attended a Creek protracted meeting. He was received with great affection and joy, and preached several times by an interpreter. He had also the happiness of seeing four candidates baptised, one of whom was a Creek chief of respectability and influence. Mr. Jones reports the state of the people to be highly encouraging. The members of the church appear well, and the religious meetings are thronged, many of the congregation attending from a distance of twenty or more miles... "Religious meetings are conducted by two black men, both slaves. The oldest, Jacob, is ordained; the other called Jack, a blacksmith, acts as interpreter. They are allowed one day in the week to support themselves and their families in food and clothing; and these days they devote to the service of the church, hiring the working of their little corn and potato patches."[33]

Later that year, another Baptist minister visited the same mission and found a revival in progress with about one hundred people having been baptized by Pastor Jacob, "some of whom were white people and some were black, but most of them were Indians."[34]

Baptist Missions in the Cherokee Nation soon established an outreach to the Mvskoke Nation to their immediate west. In the early days of the Mvskoke Nation in the West, law forbade an Indian or Negro to lead Christian worship services. Yet, according to Angie Debo, it was done anyway: "Small earnest groups met secretly, sang negro spirituals and portions of the Creek Hymns they could remember, and listened to the instructions of ignorant slaves."[35] When

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[32] Robert Hamilton, *The Gospel Among the Red Men* (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1930), 98.
[33] American Baptist Missionary Union, *Annual Report [1843]* (Boston: American Baptist Missionary Union, 1850), 141.
[34] Gaskin, 92.
[35] Angie Debo, *The Road to Disappearance (*Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1941), 118.

the hostility towards missionaries ended in the early eighteen forties, several missionaries from the Cherokee station visited the Mvskoke Baptist mission, "The church among the Creeks has been visited by the Cherokee missionaries and found to be in a prosperous condition, under the care of colored preachers. Several have been added to the church. No white missionary labors with the Creeks at present." [36]

The Baptist Mission in the Mvskoke Nation was situated in the same Ebenezer Baptist Church that was founded in 1832 by "three blacks, two white people, and one Indian in its six charter members."[37] Native preacher John Davis, the first Baptist preacher licensed and ordained in Indian Territory, led it.[38] When Davis died in 1839, he left the church in very able hands, " The members of the church appear well, and the religious meetings are thronged, many of the congregation attending from a distance of twenty or more miles...Religious meetings are conducted by two black men, both slaves. The oldest, Jacob, is ordained; the other called Jack, a blacksmith, acts as interpreter. They are allowed one day in the week to support themselves and their families in food and clothing; and these days they devote to the service of the church, hiring the working of their little corn and potato patches."[39] By 1845, Baptist and Methodist ministers were openly working in the Mvskoke territory and by the end of the following year, the ban against African preaching had been lifted. In the area where the

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[36] American Baptist Missionary Union, *Annual Report 1842,* American Baptist Historical Society, Rochester, N.Y.

[37] Gaskins, 91. *See also* Jesse Marvin Gaskins, *Trail Blazers of Sooner Baptists* (Shawnee: Oklahoma Baptist University Press, 1953); C. W. West, *Missions and Missionaries of Indian Territory* (Muscogee: Muscogee Publishing Company, 1990); E.C. Routh, *The Story of Oklahoma Baptists* (Shawnee, Oklahoma Baptist University Press, 1932).

[38] Gaskins, 547; Wyeth, 192-193; C. W. West, *Missions and Missionaries of Indian Territory* (Muscogee: Muscogee Publishing Company, 1990), 21.

[39] American Baptist Missionary Union, *Annual Report 1843,* American Baptist Historical Society, Rochester, N.Y., 141.

Arkansas River and Verdigris River, a number of churches had sprung up led by Native preachers.[40]

In late 1848, a great camp meeting was held in the Mvskoke Nation, led by Baptist missionaries from the Cherokee Nation under the auspices of Baptist missionary Evan Jones. Fourteen Mvskoke, including Chilly McIntosh and several other prominent chiefs, united with the Baptist Church, "The Congregation was made up chiefly of Creeks and blacks, with a few whites and Cherokees. I became acquainted with two very interesting and intelligent young men, one the son of the late principal chief of the Creek nation, and the other of the present chief ... They both appear well, and promise great usefulness to their people, as the speak the English and Creek languages fluently."[41] A Baptist missionary was even invited to address the council. At the time, the Mvskoke Baptists had eight preachers -- one white, four Native Americans, and three African-Americans. They had seven churches with more than 550 members.[42]

In the late 1850's Baptist missionary James S. Murrow settled among the Seminole at the North Folk Town near Eufala in the Mvskoke Nation. Murrow immediately began his missionary work, "He secured a Negro interpreter, and promptly began his life's work. December 25, [1857] Brother Murrow baptized an Indian girl. Since that time he has baptized more than a thousand Indians and almost as many whites and Blacks."[43] The North Fork Baptist Church had become "a sort of 'Jerusalem'"[44] in the Indian Territory; the church was founded in

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[40] Debo, 117.
[41] Letter of Evan Jones, American Baptist Missionary Union, *Annual Report 1849,* American Baptist Historical Society, Rochester, N.Y., 145.
[42] American Baptist Missionary Union, *Annual Report 1848,* American Baptist Historical Society, Rochester, N.Y., 271.
[43] Gaskins, 92. Murrow was from Jefferson County, Georgia but his family were originally from Charleston, S.C. For further information on Murrow, see Raymond L. Holcomb, *Father Murrow: the Life and Times of Joseph Samuel Murrow, Baptist Missionary, Confederate Indian Agent, Indian Educator, and the Father of Freemasonry in Indian Territory* (Atoka, OK: Atoka County Historical Society, 1994).
[44] Ibid.

1854 by Black Baptist Monday Durant and was also ministered by Black Baptist evangelist "Old Billy."[45] The church was later to become the center of a strong evangelical revival under the leadership of Black Baptist Harry Islands.[46]

James Factor, an interpreter and "beloved man" among the Seminole, had made the North Fork Church a center of a controversy when he became the first Seminole to convert to Christianity. Factor, a descendent of Black Factor and member of one of the oldest families of "black muscolges, "[47] was friends with Chief John Jumper of the Seminole Nation. Chief Jumper belonged to the "Moon Order," a secret society among the Seminole that dated to the pre-removal period,[48] but converted to the Baptist faith in September of 1860. Rev. Murrow, upon hearing of Chief Jumper's conversion, established a Baptist mission at Ash Creek Baptist Church with Jumper as its first member. Jumper was, within a few years, to become pastor of the church.[49]

When the Civil War came to the Indian Territory, it came with a passion and a fury that was unparalleled in the experience of the Five Nations and ripped brother from brother and tore apart the fabric of both Native and African societies. The churches that had stood as the foreground of solidarity between African Americans and Native Americans in both the Old Country and the New Country became a fortress that allowed the people to withstand the awful decimation of the Civil War. Indeed, when that war was over, the churches became the building

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[45] Gaskins, 93.
[46] Gaskins, 107-108.
[47] Wright, *Creeks and Seminoles*, 76. That the Factors were an old and important family among the Seminole Nation is evidenced by their "ownership of large numbers of cattle and slaves." (99) However, understanding them as slave owners is increasing complicated by the fact that many of them were married to the "slaves" that they owned. James Factor, himself, was married to a black woman. Another member of the Factor family emancipated his wife and children in 1843. (99)
[48] Denslow, 67.
[49] West, 108.

blocks of the New Nation that arose like a phoenix from the ashes of the Civil War…but that is another story.