Miss Sophia Sawyer: Founder of the Fayetteville Female Seminary

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In 1849, Narcissa Chisholm, a young woman of Cherokee descent, arrived to complete her education at the Fayetteville Female Seminary after spending a year at an academy in Indiana and a summer visiting her sister in Fort Smith, Arkansas. The head of the seminary, Sophia Sawyer, had evidently made an enticing offer. Chisholm had purchased a new piano in Louisville, Kentucky, and the seminary needed just such an instrument. An agreement was struck. Sawyer would receive the piano “in consideration of a finished school course” for Miss Chisholm. Chisholm, however, did not exactly understand what she was getting herself into. In her memoirs, Chisholm recalled:

On my arrival at Miss Sawyer’s Female Seminary, I didn’t understand the situation of things. I observed that whenever Miss Sawyer made her appearance every girl present began to dodge out of her sight, and find a place of retreat. One of the seniors, Annie Bell Shelton (sister of Hooley Bell), who was my classmate remained with me. As soon as Miss Sawyer disappeared I said, ‘Annie, what does this mean, the girls disappearing in this way?’ She laughed and gave me a knowing wink, saying, ‘Just wait; you’ll know soon enough.’

Miss Sawyer was a first-class regulator, and my position with the old lady was either up in the zenith or down in the depths. As a rule, I could please her, but occasionally, like all the others, I woefully missed it, and in a short time I learned to take my part in getting out of sight when the commanding officer hove in view.¹

Other sources testify to Sawyer’s formidable personality. Mrs. Anthony George Little described Sawyer as “somewhat unusual in appearance. Her


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dress was of Puritanical severity; her hair was combed smoothly over her ears as was then the custom. Her lace caps were dainty, yet dignified and reserved. No one ever thought of approaching her with the slightest familiarity, so great was her reserve.2

Through her life, Sawyer faced many difficult situations, but these same daunting personality traits allowed her to turn such circumstances into opportunities. While Ann James, a teacher at the school for a short time, described Sawyer as having a “spasmodic temperament,” Sawyer nevertheless gained the trust and support of townspeople necessary to open her school shortly after arriving in Fayetteville, Arkansas, in 1839, accompanied by the family of assassinated Cherokee leader John Ridge.3 Despite being a newcomer with no financial security, she was able to secure the donation of the land on which the school was built as well as the loans necessary to pay for building materials, labor, and furnishings. Sawyer’s success in creating the Fayetteville Female Seminary testify to her drive and determination but also to the training she had received in some of the early educational institutions open to women.

Sawyer was born in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, on May 4, 1792, one of six children of Abner Sawyer, a farmer, and his wife, Betsy. Like many children of the period, she was educated both at home and through periodic study in a neighborhood common school. After the death of her parents, Sawyer turned, as many young women did, to teaching as a means of support. Beginning about 1814, she alternated for the next several years between teaching and academy study in and around Rindge, New Hampshire. After attending New Ipswich Academy sporadically for about six years, Sawyer, with the aid of a local congregational clergyman, Seth Payson, transferred to the Byfield Female Seminary in Massachusetts, where she studied from 1820 to 1822. Sawyer helped pay for her education by working at the school.4

4Manuscript census returns, Second Census of the United States, Population Schedules, Cheshire County, New Hampshire, 1800; Ezra S. Stearns, History of the Town of Rindge, New Hampshire, from the Date of the Rowley Canada or Massachusetts Charter, to the Present Time, 1736-1874, with a Genealogical Register of the Rindge Families (Boston: Press of George H. Ellis, 1875), 686; Foreman, “Miss Sophia Sawyer,” 399; Records of the United Church Board, Memoranda Concerning Missionaries, vol. 2, pp. 243-244, Houghton Library Archives, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts; American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) Candidate Department 6, vol. 4, p. 185; Houghton Library Archives, Harvard University; Catalogue of the Members of the Female Seminary under the Care of Mr. Emerson, Byfield Seminary Collection, Mount Holyoke College Archives and Special Collections, South Hadley, Massachusetts.
Byfield Female Seminary had been founded in 1818 by Joseph Emerson, a well-known advocate of female education who sought to develop in his students the skills necessary to found their own institutions. In an address published near the end of Sawyer’s term as his student, Emerson declared that the time “was not remote,” when female institutions “greatly superior to the present” would be “as important as are now our colleges for the education of our sons.”

Emerson, like other educators of the period, saw the need to create an ordered curriculum instead of the disorganized method in place at many schools. The young women at Byfield were taught advanced academic subjects, including Latin, moral philosophy, history, geography, and science. Emerson addressed his students “as the equals of men in intellectual capacity” and conveyed to them a command of the language and the arguments necessary to win support for women’s education from patrons, parents, and surrounding communities.

Emerson imbued in his students the belief that “knowledge was desirable principally as a means of usefulness to others, and that literary selfishness was as sinful as any other selfishness.” According to his brother, “his object was not merely to have a good seminary of his own, but also to benefit other teachers, and to raise up a multitude more, of the right stamp, and ultimately fill the land with such seminaries and schools.” A contemporary wrote after Emerson’s death, “his may properly be called a parent institution. For several of his pupils and many others followed his example in establishing schools of a high order for young ladies. His usefulness in this respect, has surpassed that of any other teacher within the last half century.”

The ability to articulate to potential supporters a compelling sense of the purpose and im-

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5Joseph Emerson, *Female Education: A Discourse Delivered at the Dedication of the Seminary Hall in Saugus, January 15, 1822*, quoted in Barbara Miller Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 20. Emerson’s success in establishing himself as a leading educator of future female educators is indicated by the advice Lyman Beecher gave his daughter Catharine who planned to found a female academy in Hartford in 1823: “Go immediately to Mr. Emerson at Saugus and get from him all the information concerning his system of instruction” that she could, “staying long enough and going into his school and perhaps taking notes as an assistant till you are well possessed of his plan;” Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in Domesticity* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976), 53.


7Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women*, 16.

portance of female education and the self-confidence that Emerson inculcated became evident in Sawyer’s efforts to found her own school.

As early as 1821, Sophia Sawyer wrote of trying to find a more permanent teaching position than those she had previously held and that she was considering a move to Morgan County, Georgia. Sawyer’s willingness to travel to Georgia to accept a teaching position is evidence of her increasingly independent nature. This arrangement never came to fruition, but, in a bolder step, Sawyer decided to become a missionary teacher. That same year, she applied to the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), a body established by Congregationalists, Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians to send missionaries to serve among Native Americans. 9

Two years later, the ABCFM assigned Sawyer to teach at the Cherokee mission school in Brainerd, Tennessee, and she arrived at her post on November 21, 1823. Although the ABCFM sent numerous women to teach in mission schools, few of them wrote as much as Sophia Sawyer about their experiences and opinions. Sawyer’s many letters to her supervisors at ABCFM headquarters in Boston reveal how seriously she took her work with the Cherokees as well as how satisfying it was to her. Sawyer’s letters describing her efforts to communicate with and teach Cherokee children provide valuable insight into the classroom of a missionary teacher. They also testify to Sawyer’s strong character and independent judgment. She proved willing to think as creatively about Native American education as about women’s education, and she would advance the two in tandem through her career. Despite the fact that she displayed some of the same prejudices as her fellow missionaries, she also challenged other whites’ low expectations of Cherokee students and soon began to express a vision of higher education for Cherokee women. She frequently came into conflict with her superiors, but she also gained the respect and trust of some of the most important leaders of the Cherokee people.

Despite the hard work and long hours in her new position, Sawyer was pleased with it. She wrote in August 1824, “I am the only unmarried female belonging to the mission in this nation—I feel like an only daughter belonging to affectionate parents. I experience all that tenderness & delicacy of treatment from the brothers at Brainerd for which my situation

9Sophia Sawyer to Linda Raymond Ward Kingsbury, December 23, 1821, letters dated July 1814 through February 12, 1825, Duane Diedrich Collection, William Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; ABCFM Candidate Department 6, vol. 4, pp. 185-192.
calls.”¹⁰ This must have been a pleasant feeling for Sawyer after being so long without family around her. It also must have been comforting to know that she was welcome after risking so much and traveling so far from her home in New England.

One of the goals of the missionary schools was to teach the Cherokees to read English, especially so they could read the Bible. In her letters, Sawyer related her difficulties in teaching her students to read. However, she also described the success of her students at her first public examination in August 1824: “When the children began to recite I lost the presence of others in the delight I felt in their performance . . . . They answered readily to more than an hundred questions addressed to their understanding found in the scripture history . . . . All their answers were given promptly & correctly, & so loud as to be heard by all present.”¹¹ But Sawyer’s curriculum extended well beyond reading. At various times, Sawyer wrote to request materials for her students that included history books and a globe.¹² In 1834, she asked to be allowed to attend a “high school taught in Huntsville [Alabama] by the former pupils of Miss [Catherine] Beecher.” She wrote, “I feel the need very much of understanding Geography in its connection with Astronomy—Arithmetic too. I must know more of that & be able to give demonstrations . . . . I feel in order to teach I must be able to give the pupil to see why such & such steps bring the answer.”¹³

Sawyer soon revealed that she preferred the young Cherokees to the children she had taught in New England. She wrote, “I find the children much more interesting than I anticipated—their capacity for improvement beyond my expectation—less difficulty in making them understand—much less in governing them . . . . The task of instruction was never so pleasant as in this school, not withstanding the difficulty of their understanding English.” She continued, “Their ignorance of our language is not so appalling to the feelings of the Teacher as that contempt of government, & want of a teachable temper that is so often found in schools in N.E. [New England].” Some of the white visitors to the school expressed surprise at the conduct of the Cherokee children. One of Sawyer’s students, Betsey

¹⁰Sophia Sawyer to Jeremiah Evarts, August 3, 1824, Records of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions [hereinafter ABCFM Records], 18.3.1, vol. 3, Houghton Library Archives, Harvard University. 18.3.1 is part of the numbering system created by the archives for this extensive collection of bound letters.
¹¹Sophia Sawyer to Jeremiah Evarts, August 21, 1824, ABCFM Records 18.3.1, vol. 5, pt. 2.
¹³Sophia Sawyer to David Greene, March 15, 1834, ibid., vol. 8.
Taylor, wrote: “Mrs. Hoyt came in and saw all the little girls she said she expected to see the Cherokees more wild than they appeared to be.”

Sawyer’s letters reflect her frustration that other missionaries did not share her opinions on the academic potential of Cherokee students. For example, she differed with Rev. John C. Elsworth, who supervised the schools at the Brainerd Mission: “I am tired of hearing the word cannot when it relates to doing for the improvement of the scholars.” In an 1824 letter, she wrote, “Should the Committee keep me instructing, I hope to bring some of the girls forward to the highest branches. I was told they could not understand the sounds of the letters. This I have found by experience they can do. I had a class at examination prepared to study geography.” With Sawyer’s encouragement, the students displayed an eagerness to continue their learning at higher levels than expected. “The young ladies, that you saw when here, wish to continue in school till they are acquainted with all the branches usually taught in English schools. Their example inspires others with the same desires. Most of them now understand sufficient to find a pleasure in study.”

Not very long after her arrival in Tennessee, Sawyer had already begun to articulate to both peers and superiors her vision of an institution for Cherokees fashioned after Byfield Female Seminary. In an 1824 letter to Zilpah Grant, a fellow Byfield alumna and female educator, Sawyer described “the children [as] capable of high improvement. The females capable of refinement & delicacy of feeling seldom found in New England . . . . All they need is proper instruction & the advantage of society to make the most accomplished young ladies.” That same year, she expressed her frustration to the board director, Jeremiah Evarts: “I feel for the education of my own sex. The Cherokees think much more of their sons than their daughters. I wish to raise the female character in the Nation. It is said by the Cherokee gentlemen that there are no young ladies of their own country sufficiently educated for companions. I expect this is too true. Now all the females need is a proper education to be qualified to fill any of the relations or stations in domestic life.”

14Sophia Sawyer to Jeremiah Evarts, June 25, 1824, ibid., vol. 3; Sophia Sawyer to Cyrus Kingsbury, May 24, 1824, ibid.; Sophia Sawyer and students to Jeremiah Evarts, May 2, 1827, ibid., vol. 5, pt. 2.
15Sophia Sawyer to Jeremiah Evarts, June 25, 1824, ibid., vol. 3; Sophia Sawyer to Jeremiah Evarts, October 19, 1824, ibid., vol. 5, pt. 2.
16Sophia Sawyer to Jeremiah Evarts, October 19, 1824, ibid., vol. 5, pt. 2; Sophia Sawyer to Jeremiah Evarts, July 29, 1826, ibid.
17Sophia Sawyer to Zilpah Grant, August 3, 1824, Zilpah P. Grant Banister Papers, Series A, Correspondence, Mount Holyoke Special Collections; Sophia Sawyer to Jeremiah Evarts, August 21, 1824, ABCFM Records, 18.3.1, vol. 5, pt. 2.
But Sawyer’s expectations for her students continued to bring her into conflict with her superiors. She wrote to Evarts in 1826: “Mr. Elsworth and I do not think alike respecting [the students’] ability to understand; and as you have given him the direction of their studies I feel it my duty to act on his judgement, still I have more confidence in my own, in everything, relating to mental improvement. I rest confidently in Mr. Elsworth’s judgement in most of the affairs of the mission but I differ from most people respecting the capacity of the children.” Elsworth, for his part, later wrote “that the Girls School is losing rather than gaining ground. It does not appear to be so much for want of exertion in teaching them as in government & example. Miss Sawyer & myself differ a little in regard to the management & studies of the Girls School.”

Sawyer’s independent nature, ideas about female education and teaching in general, and somewhat thorny personality ultimately compelled the Board to transfer her to a mission at Haweis, Georgia, in 1828. Before six months had passed at her new post, Elizur Butler, the director of Haweis, had written to the Board regarding Sawyer: “With her present instability, I cannot think her a suitable person to have the care of heathen children. Her pupils will be naturally led into her peculiarities. I feel it absolutely necessary that she should be placed in some different situation.” Sawyer held firm to her commitment to educating Cherokee girls: “I have conversed with [Dr. Butler] freely respecting my duty & feelings, & offered to leave, if he chose that I should. I heard all he had to say with patience & fortitude. If I do leave the mission I am determined it shall not be my fault. I will submit to anything, if I may do good to the Cherokees. In my own view I am qualified to instruct & form the characters & morals of the girls.”

By February 1829, Sawyer had become so dissatisfied that she relocated of her own volition to another Cherokee mission at New Echota in Georgia. She had written to Evarts to explain: “Two things are certain respecting my labouring under superintendence. The persons under whose direction I am called to act must possess such qualities as to engage my affection & confidence, or I must be allowed to use my own judgement, & act on my own principles.” New Echota’s missionary, Samuel Worcester, was familiar with the circumstances and welcomed her. Sawyer soon expressed her contentment with her position: “I am happy here, so far as sym-

18Sophia Sawyer to Jeremiah Evarts, June 25, 1824, ABCFM Records, 18.3.1, vol. 3; J. C. Elsworth to Jeremiah Evarts, February 3, 1825, ibid., vol. 4.
19Sophia Sawyer to Jeremiah Evarts, January 30, 1829, ibid., vol. 5, pt. 2; Elizur Butler to Jeremiah Evarts, July, 4 1828, ibid., vol. 4; Samuel Worcester to Rufus Anderson, May 7, 1828, ibid., vol. 5, pt. 2; Sophia Sawyer to Jeremiah Evarts, September, 27, 1828, ibid.
pathy & kindness can make me so. The idea that I am in the possession of home, & domestic happiness soothes & comforts me constantly sleeping & waking. I feel at rest too in these enjoyments because I know I am associated with persons of tried integrity & judgement.” She had decided “to come to Mr. Worcester & do just what he said.”

This determination to follow Worcester’s advice may not have lasted very long. Worcester was uncertain whether Sawyer would be able to open a school in New Echota: “In regard to the expediency of her opening a school here, other than a Sabbath school, which she has already, I have much doubt. The situation and character of the population around us is such, that the attempt would be attended with difficulties, with which I fear she is not qualified to cope, though she would herself be glad to make the experiment.” In April 1830, Worcester wrote to Evarts that Sawyer had nevertheless started a school in New Echota that began with “eighteen Cherokees, three blacks, and two whites,” including his own daughter Ann Eliza. The record is silent, but one can wonder how long Sophia Sawyer badgered Worcester before he finally agreed to let her open a day school.

Sawyer appeared to be accepted by most of the Cherokees, especially those of mixed blood. However, Sawyer did relate one particularly tense confrontation with a Cherokee mother at Haweis who kept her two boys home from school. The mother complained that the children were not fed at the Haweis school, while those at Brainerd mission did get meals. When Sawyer tried to explain that they did not have the resources to feed all the children, the discussion turned heated. The mother threatened Sawyer who responded that God would defend her from evil, including the mother’s threats. She also “Pointed out to her the duties of a mother, & refered it all to the coming Judgement.” The mother replied, “I do not care if my children go to hell you shall not teach them.” Eventually, the mother apologized, and the boys returned to school, but Sawyer was not confident of either the mother’s sincerity or the potential of the children.

Other Cherokees appear to have been fond of Sawyer or, at least, respected her teaching ability. Two wealthier, mixed-blood leaders of the Cherokees, Elias Boudinot and John Ridge, especially recognized her

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21Sophia Sawyer to David Greene, May 14, 1829, ibid.; S. A. Worcester to Jeremiah Evarts, March 9, 1829, ibid.
value to their families. These two men were cousins and part of a family
that had adopted many of the cultural characteristics of white America.
They had both attended the Foreign Mission School in Cornwall, Con-
nnecticut, and had both married white women before returning to Chero-
kee territory. Perhaps they appreciated Sawyer’s commitment to
teaching her students and the fact that she did not look down upon her
Cherokee charges. Elias Boudinot once told Sophia Sawyer, “We shall
always feel indebted to you for what you have done for our children.”

After the discovery of gold in the Cherokee Nation in 1828, there was
increasing pressure from Georgians to claim the territory for their own. The
election of Andrew Jackson hastened this. Jackson made no secret that he
favored Cherokee removal, and the state of Georgia quickly announced its
intentions to annex Cherokee lands within the state. The land was to be sur-
veyed, divided into 160-acre plots, and disbursed through a land lottery that
would be held for Georgia’s white citizens. Effective June 1, 1830, those
lands would belong to Georgia.

In January 1832, troops known as the Georgia Guard began the occu-
pation of the Cherokee Nation. Sophia Sawyer wrote of their arrival in
New Echota:

The guard arrived last evening. Perhaps they will take possession
of the public buildings, if so, where the school will continue we
know not. A gentleman from Georgia came in the other morning
while the smallest class were reading—expressed great surprize
[sic] & pleasure when he heard them spell and answer questions—
repeat the commandments, & c. I was ready to ask will you banish
these children from home & all their privileges but I refrained
thanked him for his condescension [sic] in noticing our little
school answered his inquires [sic] after which he very politely
withdrew & left me to pursue my labors quietly.

24Joel Spring, The Cultural Transformation of a Native American Family and Its
Tribe, 1763-1995: A Basket of Apples (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates,
25James W. Parins, John Rollin Ridge: His Life and Works (Lincoln: University of
Nebraska Press, 1991), 14-17, 20; Sophia Sawyer to Jeremiah Evarts, July 29, 1826,
ABCFM Records, 18.3.1, vol. 5, pt. 2; Sophia Sawyer to David Greene, March 14, 1832,
ibid., vol. 8; Sophia Sawyer to David Greene, August 9, 1832, ibid. [quotation].
26Francis Paul Prucha, introduction to Cherokee Removal: The ‘William Penn’ Essays
and Other Writings, by Jeremiah Evarts (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981),
4; William McLoughlin, Cherokees and Missionaries, 1789-1839 (New Haven: Yale Uni-
versity Press, 1984), 246.
27Sophia Sawyer to David Greene, January 20, 1832, ABCFM Records, 18.3.1, vol. 8.
This person must have informed the Georgia Guard about Sawyer’s two black students, who may have been slave children belonging to one of the Cherokees. Sawyer received an anonymous letter at the end of January warning her to stop teaching them or face arrest.28

In March, the Guard visited Sawyer at her school in New Echota. Her actions in this encounter reveal a great deal about her personality. Guardsmen came first thing in the morning, and, instead of stepping outside to speak with them immediately, Sawyer asked them to come in and hear the children read. After this, she said to them that it was time for the morning prayer, but, “as it is not proper for a woman to lead in the presence of men,” she asked them to step outside. The men, who were dressed in their military uniforms, agreed to withdraw. After a short time, Sawyer went outside and found them nearby.

The officer came to the door & introduced the object of his visit in the most kind & conciliating manner—expressed a delicacy in conversing with me freely, yet intimated that his business required it . . . . He began by assurance of protection in my labors for the Cherokees & added we have heard of your doing good among them & I have seen the small children can read & speak English, . . . but said I have been informed that you are teaching slaves which is contrary to the laws of Georgia. I made known the circumstances of the school, & said Georgia cannot fear evil from these children . . . . I am not under the jurisdiction of Georgia & I think her laws that forbid the instruction of slaves are wrong & until the Supreme Court decides the case which is now pending I shall not yield to the laws of Georgia.

Sawyer reported that the discussion continued for an hour and a half. In making this argument, Sawyer was echoing the claims of Worcester and Butler, who had sued the state of Georgia contending that the Cherokees were in fact a sovereign power within the United States and that the state of Georgia had no authority over Cherokee lands. The officer tried to warn her of “the certainty of arrest if [she] persisted . . . and that my attempts to resist the laws of Georgia were fruitless—pointed [her] to Mr. W[orcester] & Dr. B[utler] as examples of folly.” The officer finally left but not before telling her that she would be reported to the commanding general. She never was arrested, but Sawyer feared that she might be. She wrote to the Board describing the whole event and asked their advice about how she should proceed.29

The U.S. Supreme Court sided with Worcester and Butler but proved unable or unwilling to prevent white Georgians from seizing Cherokee land

28Sophia Sawyer to David Greene, March 14, 1832, ibid.
and property. The missionaries for the ABCFM tried to continue their work as long as possible. However, Haweis closed in February 1834, and New Echota closed a month later when the new lottery owner came to claim it. Worcester went with his family to Brainerd, as did some of the other missionaries. Sophia Sawyer, however, remained in New Echota to continue her school. She boarded with the Boudinot family during this time. Worcester had considered closing the school in July 1833, but Boudinot, Ridge, and others donated money to help defray the cost of renting a new building. When the Worcesters left, Sawyer wrote, “My separation from that family was trying, but I had no wish to go with them to Brainerd. I have much reason to bless God for the provision he has made for me in this family, & that he keeps my scholars while so many are scattered.” In another part of the letter, Sawyer stated, “Several Cherokees have made proposals to me respecting school should I be compelled to leave N. Echota—How far they will sustain these proposals I have yet to learn; but I do think God will show me a path of usefulness.” At this point, Sawyer was still a teacher for the Board, but, in her typical fashion, she was able to secure her own position, perhaps without obtaining their permission first.

This was the beginning of Sawyer’s relationship with the Boudinots and Ridges in a situation independent of the Board. Worcester opposed such an arrangement and, on May 28, 1834, spelled out his misgivings to David Greene of the ABCFM:

She is desirous of trying the experiment of teaching unconnected with any mission family, still in the employment of the Board, but boarding in Cherokee families. In regard to such a plan I should have hopes and fears. For a time it would succeed; but I should have much apprehension that it would not long endure, and that considerable evil might result from a rupture between her and a family where she might be boarding. I am confident no Cherokee family would bear what we have borne; but in such a family I know that she does for a season command herself, and I cannot say that it would not endure. If it did, it would be because she would find motives to operate more powerfully upon her mind to produce self government, than any she has found in mission families.
Worcester also described what it was like to live with Sawyer when the Board asked him for his opinion about whether she should continue to be a teacher for the Cherokees after their removal to territory west of the Mississippi:

Indeed her character is a strange compound of inconsistencies, exhibiting some traits which appear like decided evidence of Christian character, and other which, at least if viewed by themselves, appear perfectly incompatible with the existence of true piety. And however we may excuse these latter traits of character, they certainly constitute an important disqualification for a member of a mission family. For myself, I do not well know how to have it permanently so in my own family, that the parents should often have a torment of abuse poured on them without measure in the presence of their children, by one whom those children are taught to look upon, not only as their teacher, but as a Christian, and a fellow laborer with their parents in the work of the Gospel. In this, as well as in some other respects, her example is not such as we would have before the eyes of our children . . . . We would have our dwelling a dwelling of peace; and we do not know whether peace has dwelt, we do not easily perceive how it can dwell, where Miss Sawyer is an inmate . . . . If only Miss Sawyer’s character as a teacher were to be taken into the account, I should not hesitate to recommend her being sent on to Arkansas . . . on the whole I believe she would be found superior to a great majority of female teachers of common schools in New England. In point of indefatigable effort and perseverance she can hardly be exceeded. Nor does she fail in effort and zeal to promote their spiritual welfare. It is as a member of a mission family that the objection lie against her.\(^3\)

Evidently, prominent Cherokees did not find Sawyer’s personality as problematic, or they had different expectations with respect to women’s behavior. On July 17, 1834, Worcester wrote to Greene to relate a conversation with Boudinot:

It is still [Boudinot’s] impression that it would be well for the Board to allow her to try the experiment of boarding in Cherokee families, and teaching schools. She has become exceedingly popular with some of the influential Cherokees, and has done more, he thinks, towards inclining such persons to the missionary cause.

\(^3\)Samuel Worcester to David Greene, May 28, 1834, ABCFM Records, 18.3.1, vol. 7.
Sawyer herself noted that the Cherokees might overlook her truculence in valuing her services so highly. “All I ask now is that I may make trial of a Cherokee family—Mr. R & all the family are desirous that I should do so . . . . I have told Mrs. R the irritability of my nervous system, & how I might at these seasons, speak and act wrong—she says she is prepared to bear anything, & that if her husband should ever speak rashly to me it would all pass over in a few moments.”34 The feeling the Cherokee leaders had for Sophia Sawyer was strong enough that John Ridge himself wrote to David Greene on July 24, 1834, to request that she be allowed to continue as a teacher among them. Ridge wrote, “She will accomplish as much good for a hundred dollars in the year, as those same missionary establishments which consume thousands. Her great power lies in the affections of the Cherokee families, and the success with which her labors are attended. She is popular among us, & her corrections of the scholars are not ill received by the Parents. She is truly a mother of her pupils.”35 On August 12, 1834, David Greene responded to Ridge’s letter and agreed that the “Committee will send Miss Sawyer West if she can be happy and useful there.”36

In his letter to Greene, Ridge may have given a clue to the sources both of Sawyer’s successes and difficulties as a missionary for the ABCFM: “She is lady of fine feelings & susceptibilities of mind, and in the providence of God, unsupported and uncherished by any relations in this world . . . she enjoys our keenest sympathy, and ought to be supported by the approbation of the Board. If she is not, I can not answer for the pangs of heart affliction she will experience, when the ties which connect it with the Indians in her devoted labors shall be cut asunder.”37 Because she was on her own, she became more independent, a feeling that was fostered in the literature of the era, which advocated education and teaching as a means of self-sufficiency for women.38 Her independent spirit and outspokenness caused tension with other missionaries, especially the men who supervised her. However, these traits also endeared her to the Cherokees who saw that she

33Parins, *John Rollin Ridge*, 21; Samuel Worcester to David Greene, July 17, 1834, ABCFM Records, 18.3.1, vol. 8; David Greene to John Ridge, August 12, 1834, ibid., vol. 2.
34Sophia Sawyer to David Greene, July 4, 1834, ABCFM Records, 18.3.1, vol. 8.
35John Ridge to David Greene, July 24, 1834, ibid.
36David Greene to John Ridge, August 12, 1834, ibid., vol. 2.
37John Ridge to David Greene, July 24, 1834, ABCFM Records, 18.3.1, vol. 8.
was willing to make sacrifices for them and their children. Perhaps she appealed to them because they too were outcasts in the world of the white man.

In December 1834, Elias and Harriet Boudinot visited Harriet’s parents in New England before going west to the new Cherokee territory. Sophia Sawyer finally closed her school in New Echota and went to live with the Ridge family in Tennessee near the town of Running Water. She wrote of her arrival, “We came here last Friday and found [every]thing in readiness to receive us. Mrs. Ridge [children] & servants gave us a most welcome reception. [The] poor servants seemed to rejoice in my coming [as] if they supposed I had the gift of . . . teaching. I hope to do something in teaching them.”

Sophia Sawyer’s school in Running Water closed in 1836, when the Ridge and Boudinot families finally began their journey to their new home, and she arranged to visit New England. John Ridge and Elias Boudinot departed for Cherokee lands in Indian Territory with their families in September 1836 and arrived in November. Ridge had resolved to stay out of Cherokee affairs and focused instead on building a home for his family, planting his farm, and starting a mercantile business with his father. The Ridges settled at Honey Creek in an area of the Cherokee territory near the borders of both Missouri and Arkansas and along the route their fellow Cherokees would be traveling. Sawyer did not leave New England until November 1837. After traveling to New Orleans by ship, Sawyer took a steamboat up the Mississippi and Arkansas Rivers to Fort Smith and from there to the Dwight Mission and then on to Honey Creek. She arrived in December 1837 and soon settled in and began teaching again.

Sawyer found life at Honey Creek tranquil. About a year after arriving, she wrote, “After having been tossed upon a sea of difficulties, I have found a haven of rest in this island of hope, the house which I now occupy.” She had settled into her new home and was teaching in a schoolhouse built for her by Ridge. She described the building as “a small house for instruction, just in the edge of a beautiful prairie; here I live altogether, except taking my meals with the family at the house, that is for me, eight minutes walk from this place.” The building was two stories, with the school on the lower floor and living quarters above. She taught the Ridge children, as well as other area children and a few Cherokee girls who boarded with her.

39Harriet Boudinot to David Greene, July 4, 1834, ABCFM Records, 18.3.1, vol. 8; John Ridge to David Greene, July 24, 1834, ibid.; Sophia Sawyer to David Greene, December 17, 1834, ibid.

40Sophia Sawyer to David Greene, September 21, 1836, ibid.; Wilkins, Cherokee Tragedy, 308-311; Parins, John Rollin Ridge, 22-25; Sophia Sawyer to David Greene, December 27, 1838, ABCFM Records, 18.3.1, vol. 8; Sophia Sawyer to David Greene, December 28, 1837, ibid., vol. 10.
The children varied widely in abilities and required individualized instruction. The Boudinot children did not attend her school because they studied at Park Hill, a school that Samuel Worcester established farther south in Cherokee Territory.41

On Saturday, June 22, 1839, this tranquil life at Honey Creek was shattered. Leaders of a Cherokee faction that disagreed with the signing of the 1835 treaty of New Echota, which had finalized the exchange of Cherokee land in the east for territory west of the Mississippi, voted to invoke the blood law and execute those responsible, including Ridge. This law, ironically, had been entered into the Cherokee law code by John Ridge himself in 1829 and set a punishment of death for any member of the tribe who sold tribal land without the permission of tribal leaders. Early that morning, a band of armed men entered the Ridge home with the intention of killing John Ridge in his bed. When their gun failed to fire, they dragged him out in front of the house where they proceeded to stab him repeatedly. The killers added to the horrifying act by each stepping on him before they rode away. Ridge’s wife and children witnessed the execution but were held back by the men and prevented from assisting him. Sawyer and her students had been to dinner at the Ridge home the evening before but had returned to the schoolhouse by the time of the attack.42 Other leaders who had signed the Treaty of New Echota were also killed that day, including John Ridge’s father, Major Ridge, and Elias Boudinot. Violence between the “Anti-Treaty” and “Treaty” parties would continue for decades.

Sawyer became a source of strength for Sarah Ridge and her children during this difficult time. They were soon advised by allies among the Cherokees to leave Indian Territory and decided to move a few miles across the Arkansas border to Fayetteville. Sawyer later wrote: “Mrs. Ridge was sustained under the overwhelming affliction, & had not an influence been exerted by interested persons to have her leave the nation, urging as reasons that herself and children were in danger, I should have succeeded in keeping the family & school together. This I did for several days after Mr. Ridge’s death, but when I saw her sinking under the weight of sorrow—fearful apprehensions, & undecided anxieties, I consented to leave for this town as the nearest place of safety & accommodation.” Sawyer appears to have started a school in Fayetteville soon after arriving in

41Sophia Sawyer to David Greene, December 27, 1838, ABCFM Records, 18.3.1, vol. 10; Parins, John Rollin Ridge, 27.
42Wilkins, Cherokee Tragedy, 335; Parins, John Rollin Ridge, 30; Sophia Sawyer to David Greene, October 10, 1839, ABCFM Records, 18.3.1, vol. 10.
1839, as a means of support for herself and the Ridges, and by the time she wrote the letter she had thirty-two scholars enrolled.\textsuperscript{43}

In 1839, Fayetteville was a rugged frontier town of about 400 people on the edge of Indian Territory. First settled in 1828, it was the seat of Washington County. However, it was not until 1835 that President Andrew Jackson issued the land patent for the town. Soon after the family’s arrival, John Ridge’s son, John Rollin Ridge, recorded his impressions of Fayetteville: “In this town there are three groceries & the people sometimes fight with knives and pistols, & some men have been killed here, but the people do not seem to mind it much. In this town there are two saddler shops, two tailor shops—three blacksmith shops—one silversmith, one gunsmith, eight stores, & two taverns & a good many other houses. There are several carpenters & cabinet workmen in this town. There are also several lawyers & they have a good deal of business. This town is a county seat.” Sawyer attached her own description to John Rollin’s: “The country is in a very undesirable situation respecting its civil institutions—yesterday another man was hung here without trial except by a committee chosen on the spot.”\textsuperscript{44}

Sawyer’s new position teaching in a school in Fayetteville meant that she was now working independently of the ABCFM—free from the restrictions she had encountered as a missionary teacher and no longer subject to the constraints of their supervision. She did, however, continue to correspond for several years with members of the Board seeking their advice and guidance. Though she now had to support herself, she also had the opportunity to create the type of institution she had dreamed of and utilize the skills she had learned from Emerson. She took steps to establish an institution that resembled Mount Holyoke, which had been created in 1837 by her former Byfield classmate, Mary Lyon. At Mount Holyoke, Lyon created a curriculum that included subjects such as physiology, algebra, chemistry, botany, astronomy, geology, logic, geography, history, grammar, and literature. Some of these courses, particularly botany, geology, and chemistry, were not typically offered to women in other institutions, especially away from the east coast.\textsuperscript{45} Historian Anne Firor Scott has described the “ever widening circle” of New England academy graduates, like Sawyer, who spread out across the country taking New England edu-

\textsuperscript{43}Sophia Sawyer to David Greene, October 10, 1839, ABCFM Records, 18.3.1, vol. 10.
\textsuperscript{44}Sophia Sawyer to David Greene, December 7, 1839, ibid. See, also, Pat Donat, “Miss Sophia Sawyer and Her School [Part 1],” \textit{Flashback} 23 (August 1973): 12.
\textsuperscript{45}Porterfield, \textit{Mary Lyon}, 42; Nash, \textit{Women’s Education}, 82.
cational ideas with them. Sawyer used her new found independence and her determination to create the Fayetteville Female Seminary, where she spent the remaining fifteen years of her life.

Sawyer’s school developed from modest beginnings. Clementine Boles, a Fayetteville resident, recorded that Sophia Sawyer’s school “began . . . in a small log hut in this town, and there were those of our citizens who will remember as they passed the school that it presented a marked difference from other schools over the country at that early date.” At some point, the school was moved to the second floor of a store, and Sawyer and her students boarded with the Stirman family. This location caused her some consternation. The first floor was occupied by a “Thespian Society,” and she lamented “the scholars passing almost every hour of the day while stage players were practising.” She was later able to rent a more “convenient house.”

As a student at Byfield, Sawyer had learned skills she would finally put into practice to solicit aid from potential benefactors. She was an outsider from New England, but her educational practices and her ability to advocate for herself garnered support from several prominent members of the Fayetteville community. In August 1840, the jurist and politician David Walker and his wife, Jane, donated a parcel of land for the seminary. According to the indenture, the land was given “in consideration of the respect they feel and the confidence they have in [her] capacity and industry in conducting her school and instructing her pupils and for the purpose of securing her services to the citizens of Fayetteville and the neighborhood around.” Two wealthy merchants, J. H. Stirman and James Sutton, also assisted in the financing and building of what would become Fayetteville Female Seminary.

Sawyer explained to the ABCFM that she had “purchased materials for building 28 by 20 two stories” and that “the house will stand elevated overlooking a beautiful valley, mountain and woodland seen in the distance. The area is sufficiently large for flowers, shrubbery and fruit trees.” By 1847, she was able to expand and improve the original building. In a letter to a potential teacher, she wrote, “Mr. Walker, our benefactor, has placed a large and commodious house on the lot adjoining ours.” These two buildings

47 Foreman, “Miss Sophia Sawyer,” 399, 401; Sophia Sawyer to David Greene, August 28, 1840, ABCFM Records, 18.3.1, vol. 10.
48 Foreman, “Miss Sophia Sawyer,” 402; Sophia Sawyer to David Greene, August 12, 1841, ABCFM Records, 18.3.1, vol. 10.
were close enough to be connected by a smaller building with “sliding doors, that can convert the house into one room when necessary.”

When Sawyer began her school in Fayetteville in 1839, most of her students, according to John Rollin Ridge, were boys. As time passed, more and more girls attended the school. By the time she opened the new building in 1841, all the students were girls. Existing records are scant and do not indicate how many of the students at the Fayetteville Female Seminary were Cherokee. However, accounts written by some of the students and included in Sawyer’s letters make clear that both Cherokee and white girls were enrolled. Sawyer herself wrote in January 1840 that “Pupils from every direction are coming under my influence now . . . [and] friends from both parties [i.e. Treaty and Anti-Treaty] bring their children to me here.” In February of that year, she wrote that they were expecting “twelve pupils from the Nation.”

Historian Carolyn Foreman reported, “The first students in Miss Sawyer’s school were fourteen Cherokee girls, daughters of the Drews, Ridges, Rosses, Adairs and Starrs.” She quotes A. W. Arrington’s description of their arrival:

The passage of the Cherokees through the principal streets of the village was picturesque in the extreme. Then followed the families of wealth—the Cherokee aristocracy—in their splendid carriages, many of which were equal to the most brilliant that rattle along Broadway. In 1840 there were fifty-one pupils in the school.

The presence of Cherokee girls in a school also attended by white girls would seem to be unusual. One of the teachers at the school, Ann James, indicated in her autobiography that this may have caused some problems for Sawyer. According to James, who would later start her own school in Mount Comfort, outside of Fayetteville, some “parents were not able to send [their daughters] to boarding school. They could have ridden to Fayetteville, but the Indian element of Miss S’s school was an insurmountable objection with many of them.” However, this must have become less of a problem as the reputation of the seminary, and of Sawyer herself, spread throughout the region.
Sawyer felt compelled to protect the reputations of her students by regulating their contact with the residents of Fayetteville. Narcissa Chisholm remembered an event in about 1850:

Our friend, Mr. Watson, a town merchant, had, among his many characteristics, a love for music and he, with Colonel Pulliam was a true friend of our school. One evening Mr. Watson decided to give us a serenade, and, gathering the usual number of musicians together, came down to the seminary where Miss Sawyer was the queen bee, who ruled us with a rod (not only the girls, but the friends through the town as well).

When Mr. Watson and the musicians arrived they went in on the lower porch of the main school building and began to tune up violins and speak in gentle tones. Miss Sawyer caught on to it and decided she would not have any serenade that night. Out she went out on the upper porch and gave peremptory orders to the musicians to depart, which orders they of course felt compelled to obey. The next day, on second thought, Miss Sawyer concluded that possibly she had been a little hasty in her actions in ordering the serenaders away, and resolving to apologize to Mr. Watson, she began her note somewhat after this fashion: ‘My dear Mr. Watson: Last night when you arrived you aroused me from a horrible dream, and I thought you were burglars or housebreakers. Of course I felt compelled to protect the place. This is to beg that you will come and give us a serenade, and the next time you come let the soft strains of your music arouse the young ladies from their slumbers, and not your boisterous conversation’.

Mr. Watson, knowing the old lady’s peculiarities, with his lovely character accepted this remarkable apology in due form and a few evenings later returned and was permitted by the guardian of the place to give us girls a lovely serenade.53

Students at Fayetteville Female Seminary followed a strict regimen, which is demonstrated in this story told by one of Sawyer’s students to her children:

She held every girl to strict account. On Sunday mornings the girls walked in dignified lines, two and two, to church, with Miss Sawyer at the head and her assistant, Miss Foster, at the rear. At six

each morning, Miss Sawyer opened the stair door and called, ‘Spring, young ladies!’ They were required to walk a mile before breakfast in order to make their cheeks rosy and to give them an appetite for the morning meal, which consisted of hot cakes, butter, weak syrup, and weaker tea. Young ladies were expected to be dainty in their eating. At night, after study hour, the tinkle of a little silver bell called the girls to the study hall for prayer. After vespers, the girls went to their respective rooms and to bed.54

Some of the students at the Fayetteville Female Seminary boarded with families hand-picked by Sawyer. This was usually not a problem for the family unless the student became sick. As a modern newspaper account reported:

When one of her pupils became ill, whether they boarded at the school or in a private home, Miss Sawyer stayed with them until they were well. Her teaching duties were taken over by the other instructors in the school. People who boarded her girls dreaded her arrival under these circumstances as she subordinated the entire household to the care of her patient. First the room was thoroughly cleaned, then clean bed clothes and sleeping garments. Miss Sawyer personally supervised the preparation of good nourishing food and throughout the illness ruled the house with an iron hand that was not always kept in a velvet glove.55

Descriptions of the physical assets of the Fayetteville Female Seminary indicate a curriculum, including history, geography and the sciences, that resembled those of Mount Holyoke and other institutions influenced by the ideas of Joseph Emerson. Martha Trimble, a student in 1842, listed some of the school’s “seventeen pictures . . . and seven maps.” These included “the Death of Napoleon, Pocahantas saving the life of Captain John Smith, and Bonaparte encamped, . . . George Washington . . . Lafayette standing at Washington’s grave; . . . the Solar Sistem . . . [and] the Prodigal son in misery,” as well as maps of the United States, the World, and the Indian Territory. Providing evidence of the study of natural philosophy, Trimble explained that “thunder is not heard for some time after the lightning is seen . . . [because] the sound is much

54Mrs. Anthony George Little, Noted Daughters of Arkansas (Blytheville, AR: privately printed, 1947).
longer at arriving at our ears, than light is at our eyes for light moves almost instantaneously; but sound moves at the rate of 1,142 feet a second.” An 1849 advertisement for the Seminary boasted, “the addition of a very good and well furnished Air Pump has been made to the Philosophical Apparatus, making, in all, a very respectable collection. This will afford greater facility and clearness, than heretofore, in giving instruction and illustrations in that science.”

Sawyer wanted to provide an institution of higher schooling, where women could study both academic subjects and ornamental pursuits, such as needlework, often regarded by parents and their daughters as necessary for a well-educated woman. Evidence suggests that Sawyer succeeded in achieving this vision. An advertisement from 1841 announced a curriculum including “Reading, Spelling, Defining, Geography, History, Mental Arithmetic, and Geometry . . . Writing, Grammar, Rhetoric, Composition, Ancient Geography, Ancient History, Logic, Natural Philosophy, and Astronomy.” Another advertisement promised that:

*thoroughness* will characterize the teaching in every department. Especial pains will be taken to make the pupils *good readers*. The pupils will be advanced to higher branches as fast as, and *no faster* than, they shall be prepared by a thorough understanding of the subordinate branches. The ambition of the teachers is not to send forth pupils, who have run over a great deal of ground, but those who have thoroughly cultivated what they have gone over.

Like Mary Lyon at Mount Holyoke, Sawyer emphasized not only academic but also religious instruction and daily physical activity. Lyon tried to select students of a certain caliber for her school, and Sawyer did the same by requiring applicants to “bring testimonials of good moral character.” There were some differences between the two institutions. Sawyer did not conduct religious revivals at Fayetteville Female Seminary, nor does she appear to have advocated missionary work as a vocation to which her students should aspire. Both of these were an integral part of the Mount Holyoke routine. Also, because Sawyer was attempting to recruit students from a community with a smaller and less prosperous population than that

56Martha Trimble to David Greene, June 1842, ABCFM Records, 18.3.1, vol. 10.
57*Arkansas State Democrat* (Little Rock), February 16, 1849.
58*Witness* (Fayetteville), February 6, 1841.
59*Arkansas State Democrat*, February 16, 1849.
around Mount Holyoke, it was necessary for her to take in a broader age group of students, while Lyon was able to focus on young women.\textsuperscript{60}

For the first eight years of the school’s existence, Sawyer taught most of the academic subjects in the primary branch herself. Recognizing her own limitations, however, she realized that if she wanted to develop the institution of higher learning she truly desired, she would need to recruit teachers to teach advanced subjects. This became an ongoing challenge. The Woman’s Missionary Society in Boston was one association she contacted to request suitable instructors. Ann James had been accepted by the Society in 1846 to become a missionary teacher in the expanding territory of the western United States. She was sent to Fayetteville to teach at Sawyer’s school, but only remained a year before leaving to open her own school in Mount Comfort. Evidently, James became sick soon after arriving, and Sawyer hired other teachers to replace her. When James recovered, she was offered a lower paying position at the school. Sawyer’s demanding nature and a disagreement about James’ duties led to her departure.\textsuperscript{61} Before she departed from New England, James had been warned, perhaps by Board member David Greene, about Sawyer’s “spasmodic temperament” and how Sawyer had been moved “from one Mission station to another to avoid accepting the resignation of older and well-tried Missionaries, for wherever she was she expected to be the controlling spirit.” James found Sawyer to be “exactly as I had been informed—one day full of hope and perfectly delighted with the signs of progress of the pupils, and perhaps the very next day perfectly disconsolate about the school, thinking nobody was doing their duty.” Yet James recognized Sawyer’s abilities, writing: “She was exceedingly visionary, and had gotten the merchants to bring on books—in mathematics for instance—fit for advanced college students. She thought she had laid such a good foundation that it would be easy to build a brilliant structure on it in a short time.” James also noted that “Miss Sawyer taught a primary school for years and taught thoroughly, for she was not woman to leave any work she undertook half done . . . . She was a woman of indomitable energy and perseverance. She could do the work of three.”\textsuperscript{62}

With the departure of James, Sawyer evidently turned to Mount Holyoke, a growing source of female educators who were trained in a vision of

\textsuperscript{60}Emily Penton, “Typical Women’s Schools in Arkansas before the War of 1861-65,” \textit{Arkansas Historical Quarterly} 4 (Winter 1945): 325-326.

\textsuperscript{61}Sophia Sawyer to David Greene, June 20, 1846, ABCFM Records, 18.3.1, vol. 12; Sophia Sawyer to David Greene, August 20, 1847, ibid.; Sophia Sawyer to David Greene, May 10, 1848, ibid.; Deane G. Carter, “A Place in History for Ann James,” \textit{Arkansas Historical Quarterly} 28 (Winter 1969): 314, 320; Foreman, “Miss Sophia Sawyer,” 405.

female education similar to Sawyer’s own. Though there is no existing evidence of correspondence between Mary Lyon and Sawyer, Sawyer advertised in the *Fort Smith Herald* in 1849 that Lucretia Foster, a Mount Holyoke graduate, would soon arrive to teach at the Fayetteville Female Seminary. In 1853, Mary True Daniels followed Foster from Mount Holyoke to Fayetteville. Both women eventually married and made Fayetteville their home. Another teacher at the school was none other than Narcissa Chisholm, who had graduated in 1850.63

Sophia Sawyer’s abilities and the success of the Fayetteville Female Seminary did not go unnoticed by others in the region. As was the practice at academies around the country, Sawyer held periodic public examinations to evaluate the academic abilities of her students. These displays allowed members of the community to witness the skills and talents that students had developed at the school. In July 1845, the *Arkansas Intelligencer* described one such examination and told of the “great advancement of the scholars and the high capacity of the teachers . . . . We are well acquainted with Miss Sawyer and know that her system of teaching is better adapted to perfect the education of youth than any other in this State and her school is as good as that of any other. If a few more such teachers were sustained in Arkansas, we should see her occupying a high stand among her sisters.” In August 1850, the *Fort Smith Herald* gave a very favorable report of another examination: “[I] was very much pleased to see the good order, and surprised to find the proficiency made by the students in the different departments of Education. We had no idea that we had an institution, in our state, that possessed such advantages.” The reporter also wrote of Sawyer: “‘Solitary and alone,’ without relations or friends, far from her native state, without a fortune, but with limited means, has she, by a woman’s energy, built up an institution, that has done much for female education in Arkansas, and which is destined in a few years, to rank high, as an institution of learning for the young ladies of this state.”64

Sophia Sawyer had battled tuberculosis throughout her life, and she finally died in 1854. Susan Ridge, who had been a friend and benefactor for many years, wrote to a relative, “Miss Sawyer ceased all her toils and suffering on the 22nd of February last. Her body now rests near the school where she spent the last years of her life establishing a female seminary of

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first standing in Arkansas.” Even after death she was known as Miss Sawyer, including to Susan Ridge who had been her friend for many years.\textsuperscript{65}

In her will, Sawyer left her property, including the seminary, to Rev. David Greene of the ABCFM. Greene later sold the property to Mary True Daniels who took Lucretia Foster as her partner in 1858. The following year, the state legislature granted the seminary a charter, which created a six-member board of trustees and exempted the school from taxes. According to Emily Penton, this was done because “the institution was established in the beginning by a female, had been in operation to the present, and was still owned and carried on by females; and since so many donations of tuition have been made by the said females to poor and indigent children.” The Fayetteville Female Seminary continued until the Civil War. Like many other schools in the South, it closed during the war. The buildings were used as a hospital, and in 1863 they were consumed by a fire.\textsuperscript{66}

The establishment of the Fayetteville Female Seminary was the ultimate achievement of Sawyer’s life. As early as 1824, she had expressed concern over the education of females in the Cherokee tribe and made it clear that she felt she could do a better job than her male superiors. Although it took her another fifteen years to achieve her goal, the Fayetteville Female Seminary realized her original ambition, an ambition that had been articulated and nurtured by Joseph Emerson while she was his student.

In July 1849, Sawyer, believing she was dying, placed an ad in the *Cherokee Advocate*:

\begin{quote}
The school . . . has of necessity assumed its present position before the public. These houses, and these grounds, and all the facilities for giving instruction here, did not spring up by magic, in this new and uncultivated country. They have appeared one after another, under God, by the most energetic, untiring, and I would add of true patient effort. But persevere I have until my nature is yielding under the pressure of complicated labor . . . . And in the future, though through the imbecility of age, my labor in the drudgery of the school, may be deviating and uncertain, yet the undying part of my nature, guided by Infinite Wisdom, is going forward with unhesitating step to raise this Institution above competition—to an eminence, whose influence shall overlook the whole length and breadth of our State and surrounding country; looking into eternity, shall shed mortal light and knowledge upon all classes, from
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{65}Foreman, “Miss Sophia Sawyer,” 413.

\textsuperscript{66}Ibid.; Penton, “Women’s Schools in Arkansas,” 327.
the lowest hut of the untaught Indian, and the humblest cot of the poor peasant to the spacious hall of the man of wealth and science.  

This passage demonstrates Sophia Sawyer’s ultimate aspiration: to create an “Institution above competition.” She wanted to establish a school that would rival Mount Holyoke. The fact that she was able to achieve success as a newcomer in a frontier community such as Fayetteville is a testament to her tenacity and passion. It is also significant that she did so with a student body that combined white students with Cherokee and mixed blood students. Fayetteville’s willingness to accept such an institution suggests the strong impression that Sawyer made on the community.

After Sophia Sawyer’s death, her pupils chose a marble shaft to adorn her grave. On this monument was engraved: “She hath done what she could.” This was a common epitaph seen on the headstones of many missionary women. However, it is an understatement in terms of the life experiences and achievements of Sophia Sawyer. She was willing to battle difficult circumstances and the bureaucracy of the missionary system in order to institute her own ideas and methods in the classroom. Sawyer refused to accept the limited view of her superiors at the ABCFM when it came to what her Cherokee students were capable of achieving. Sawyer admittedly had a difficult personality, but it served her well in trying circumstances. In the end, Sophia Sawyer was sought out and supported by both white and Cherokee parents for her ability to achieve results with her students.
