



## *Memoir of Catharine Brown* Rufus Anderson (1825)

*Catharine Brown was born to parents of blended Cherokee-white ancestry and grew up on Cherokee tribal lands located within northeastern Alabama. In her late teens, she attended the Brainerd Mission School, which had been founded on Cherokee lands in Tennessee by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), a Protestant organization headquartered in New England. At Brainerd, Brown became the ABCFM's first convert from an indigenous American nation. Brown's father withdrew her from the school twice—first at the end of January 1818 and then again in November of that year—in anticipation of the family's resettling west of the Mississippi River; but both times, Brown returned to Brainerd after her parents' moving plans fell through. She launched a school for Cherokee girls in her Alabama homeland in 1820 but died of tuberculosis just a few years later, at around age 23.*

*The following selections come from a biography of Brown written by Rufus Anderson, a white Congregational minister who worked for the ABCFM. Anderson's biography incorporated letters and diaries written by Brown herself, as well as by missionaries who had known her. These selections offer windows into Brown's relationships, as a Christianized Cherokee, with whites, with other Cherokees, and with their cultures.*

### **1. Anderson narrates Brown's background and conversion** (through February 1818)

Catharine Brown was born about the year 1800. The place of her nativity was a beautiful plain, covered with tall forest trees, in a part of the country belonging to the Cherokee Indians, which is now called Wills Valley and is within the chartered limits of the state of Alabama. [...] The Indian name of Catharine's father is Yau-nu-gung-yah-ski, which signifies "the drowned by a bear." He is, however, known among the whites by the name of John Brown. The Cherokee name of her mother is Tsa-luh; the whites call her Sarah. Neither of Catharine's parents understand the English language. [...]

Early in the autumn of 1816, a missionary, sent by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, made his appearance in a general council of the Cherokees and offered to establish schools among them. His offer was favorably received. [...] Information of these proceedings soon spread through the nation. It came to the ears of Catharine, then living at the distance of a hundred miles, and excited in her a desire to attend the school. She besought her parents to send her, and they granted her request. Accordingly, on the 9th of July, 1817, when she was about seventeen or eighteen years of age, she became a member of the missionary school at Brainerd. [...]

From the testimony of different persons, it appears that when she entered the school, her knowledge on religious subjects was exceedingly vague and defective. Her ideas of God extended little further than the contemplation of him as a great Being existing somewhere in the sky, and her conceptions of a future state were quite undefined. Of the Savior of the world, she had no knowledge. She supposed that the Cherokees were a different race from the whites and therefore had no concern in the white people's religion; and it was some time before she could be convinced that Jesus Christ came into the world to die for the Cherokees. She has been known

also to remark, subsequently to her conversion, that she was much afraid when she first heard of religion; for she thought [that] Christians could have no pleasure in this world and that if she became religious, she too should be rendered unhappy. [...]

Catharine had been in the school but a very few months before divine truth began to exert an influence upon her mind. This was manifested in an increased desire to become acquainted with the Christian religion and in a greater sobriety of manners. [...] It is proper to add that she did not seem, at any time, to be greatly influenced by a fear of the punishment threatened against sin. Her chief object of solicitude seemed, rather, to be that she might know the will of God and do it. She appeared to seek the kingdom of heaven with great earnestness, and spent much time in reading the scriptures, singing, and prayer, and was often affected to tears. [...]

In December [1817] she indulged a hope that she had been pardoned and accepted through the Lord Jesus Christ. And it is no small proof of the excellent practical tendency of her religion that, of her own accord, she very soon began to pray with her associates and to assist in teaching the Lord's Prayer and the catechism to the younger girls in the school. [...] Her desires for the salvation of her people were strong and ardent. She wept and prayed for them in secret places, as well as in the company of her female friends at their weekly prayer meetings. [...] Catharine is regarded as the first who was hopefully converted from among the Indians by means of the missionaries sent out by the American Board of Missions. [...]

At the commencement of the year 1818, her father came to take her home. He expressed entire satisfaction with the treatment which she had received at the school, but said he contemplated removing beyond the Mississippi and wished to have her with him. This intimation was not less painful to Catharine than it was to the missionaries; but it came under circumstances which seemed to demand an acquiescence. "Perhaps," said her teachers and spiritual guides, "the Lord is taking her from us that she may be more useful in promoting his cause in some other place."

[...] Catharine desired to receive, before her departure, the seal of the covenant of grace in the holy ordinance of baptism. As no reasonable doubt could be entertained of her piety, her request was cheerfully granted. On the 25th of January, Mr. Kingsbury preached from Galatians 3:28 on the fellowship of those who are in Christ, of whatever color or nation. The assembly was unusually large and solemn. After the sermon and a prayer, the sacred ordinance was administered to the deeply affected convert. She was the first Indian baptized by the missionaries of the Board. [...]

The month of February was spent by Catharine at her father's house. But circumstances conspiring to prevent an immediate execution of the purpose to remove to the Arkansas country, she was, to the no small satisfaction of herself and the mission family, permitted to revisit Brainerd and continue there a few months longer before commencing her undesired journey. While at home, she had been closely questioned with respect to her religious faith by some irreligious white people. They endeavored, though in vain, to perplex her mind by objections against the scriptures. But her parents were pleased that she had learned so many good things and expressed a desire to be themselves instructed.

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## **2. ABCFM officer Jeremiah Everts describes Brown in a report on a visit to Brainerd** (May 1818)

Her parents are half-breeds who have never learned to speak English; yet if you were to see her at a boarding school in New England as she ordinarily appears here, you would not distinguish her from well-educated females of the same age, either by her complexion, features, dress, pronunciation, or manners. [...]

When she joined the school in July last, [...s]he was vain and excessively fond of dress, wearing a profusion of ornaments in her ears. [...] Last fall, she became serious, is believed to have experienced religion in the course of the autumn, and was baptized in January. [...] At meetings for social prayer and religious improvement, held by [the women of the mission] every Thursday afternoon and Sabbath evening, Catharine prays in her turn, much to the gratification of her sisters in Christ. Her prayers are distinguished by great simplicity as to thought and language and seem to be the filial aspirations of the devout child.

Before Mrs. Chamberlain took charge of the girls, Catharine had, of her own accord, commenced evening prayer with them just as they were retiring to rest. Sometime after this practice had been begun, it was discovered by one of the missionaries, who, happening to pass by the cabin where the girls lodge, overheard her pouring forth her desires in very affecting and appropriate language. On being inquired of respecting it, she simply observed that she had prayed with the girls because she thought it was her duty. [...]

Since she became religious, her trinkets have gradually disappeared, till only a single drop remains in each ear. On hearing that pious females have, in many instances, devoted their ornaments to the missionary cause, she has determined to devote hers also.

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## **3. Excerpts from the mission diary narrate Brown's second withdrawal from Brainerd** (November 1818)

*November 4.* The parents of Catharine Brown called on us. They are on their way to the [Indian] agency. The old gray-headed man, with tears in his eyes, said he must go over the Mississippi. The white people would not suffer him to live here. They had stolen his cattle, horses, and hogs until he had very little left. He expected to return from the agency in about ten days and should then want Catharine to go home and prepare to go with him to the Arkansas. We requested him to leave his daughter with us yet a little while and go to the Arkansas without her, and we would soon send her to him with much more knowledge than she now has. To this he would not consent [...]

*November 20.* We had a very affecting scene in the departure of our sister Catharine. Her father and mother, returning from the agency to go to the Arkansas, stopped yesterday for the purpose of taking her with them. [...] The struggle was very severe. She wept and prayed and promised to come to them as soon as she had finished her literary education and acquired some further knowledge of the Christian religion. We engaged that she should be provided for while here and assisted in going to them. Her mother said she could not live if Catharine would not now go with them. Catharine replied that to her it would be more bitter than death to leave us and go where

there were no missionaries. Her father became impatient and told her if she would not mind him and go with them now, he would disown her forever; but if she would now go, as soon as missionaries came to the Arkansas (and he expected they would be there soon), she might go and live with them as long as she pleased. He wished her to have more learning.

Never before had this precious convert so severe a trial; and never, perhaps, did her graces shine so bright. She sought for nothing but to know her duty and asked for a few minutes to be by herself, undisturbed. She returned and said she would go. After she had collected and put up her clothing, the [mission] family were assembled, a parting hymn was sung, and a prayer offered. With mingled emotions of joy and grief, we commended her to the grace of God, and they departed.

Precious babe in Christ! A few months ago brought out of the dark wilderness; here illuminated by the word and Spirit of God; and now to be sent back into the dark and chilling shades of the forest, without one fellow traveler with whom she can say, "Our Father!"

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#### 4. Three letters written by Brown to white missionaries (November 1818–July 1819)

*[To Matilda Loomis Williams, in Eliot, Mississippi]<sup>a</sup>*

Brainerd  
November 1, 1818

My dearly beloved sister,

I have been wishing to write to you ever since you left us. You can hardly tell how my heart ached when I parted with you, expecting never to see you again in this world; but when I remembered that you were in the hands of the Lord and that he would dispose of you as he pleased, it gave me joy equal to my sorrow.

Oh, how I rejoiced to think that you were going to carry the glad tidings of salvation to a people who had never heard of the dear Savior. I do hope and pray that the Lord will bless your labors among them, as he has here. [...]

All the Cherokee brothers and sisters are well. Three of the [students], viz., Lydia Lowry [and] Alice and Peggy Wilson, we hope have obtained an interest in the Savior. Mr. Wilson came here and wished to take his daughters on a visit to Mr. Brown's. Nearly a week after, he sent word that he was not going to send them back to school again. We felt very much grieved to hear it.

I expect my father here every day. I do not know whether I shall go to the Arkansas or not. I feel grieved when I think of leaving my Christian friends and of going far from all religious people into a wild, howling wilderness, where no star shines to guide my wandering feet to the Babe of

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<sup>a</sup> *Matilda Loomis Williams and her husband, Loring, were missionaries at Brainerd while Brown was there. They then left Brainerd to start a new mission on Choctaw lands within the state of Mississippi.*

Bethlehem, where no warning voice is heard to keep me in the straight path that leads to heaven. When I look to that dark region, I start back; but when I think of my two brothers there, and my dear parents who are soon to go, I feel reluctant to stay behind and leave them to perish alone.

*[To William and Flora Hoyt Chamberlain, at Brainerd]*

Fort Deposit [Alabama]  
December 12, 1818

My dearly beloved Brother and Sister Chamberlain,

I just sit down to address you with my pen. But is this all? Am I so soon called to bid you adieu and see your faces no more in this world? O my beloved friends, you know not the love I bear to that blessed spot where I have spent so many happy hours with you; but it is past, never to return.

[...] Since I left you, I have led a very lonesome life [...] I am here amongst a wicked set of people, and never hear prayers nor any godly conversation. O my dear friends, pray for me: I hope you do. There is not a day passes but I think of you and the kindness I received during the time I stayed with you. It is not my wish to go to the Arkansas, but God only knows what is best for me. I shall not attempt to tell you what I have felt since I left you, and the tears I have shed when I called to mind the happy moments we passed in singing the praises of God. However, I bear it as well as I possibly can, trusting in our dear Savior, who will never leave nor forsake them that put their trust in him.

It may be possible that I may see you once more; it would be a great happiness to me if I don't go to the Arkansas. Perhaps I may; but if I should go, it is not likely we shall meet in this world again—but you will excuse me, for my heart feels what I cannot express with my pen. When I think and see the poor thoughtless Cherokees going on in sin, I cannot help blessing God that he has led me in the right path to serve him. [...]

I shall conclude with my love to all my brothers and sisters at Brainerd. Sister Flora, do kiss all the children for me. I shall expect letters from all the little girls. Oh, may we meet at least in the kingdom of our blessed Savior, never more to part. Farewell, my dear brother and sister, farewell.

*[To Loring and Matilda Loomis Williams, in Eliot, Mississippi]*

Brainerd  
July 5, 1819

My dear Brother and Sister Williams,

Although I have long omitted answering your affectionate letters, my heart has been often with you. [...] I feel much indebted to you, but more particularly to that God who sent you here to instruct the poor ignorant Indians in the way that leads to everlasting life. O my dear friends, may the Lord ever bless you and make you the instrument of doing great good where he has called you. [...]

When I wrote you before, I expected to go to the Arkansas and never to see this place again. But the Lord has, in mercy, ordered it otherwise. He has permitted me to live with the dear missionaries here again, though my parents could not bear to think of leaving me behind. My mother said if I remained here, she did not expect to see me again in this world. Indeed, she wished she had never sent me to this school and that I had never received religious instruction. I told her if she was a Christian, she would not feel so. She would be willing to give me, and all she had, up to Christ. I told her I did not wish to stay on account of my own pleasure, but that I wished to get more instruction, so that it might be for her good as well as for mine.

I felt very sorry for my poor parents. I thought it was my duty to go in obedience to their commands and commit myself to the will of God. I knew the Lord could change the hearts of my parents. They are now perfectly willing that I should stay here two years longer. I left them in March. They expected to set out in that month for the Arkansas. They had already prepared for the journey. But the Lord has so ordered [things] that they have concluded not to go until next fall. I don't know whether they will go then. I hope you will pray for them and also for me, that I may be useful to my dear people. My heart bleeds for their immortal souls. Oh, that I might be made the means of turning many souls from darkness unto marvelous light.

My dear brother and sister, I love you much and feel that the time is short when we shall sit down with our Savior and experience that love which no words can describe.

**Source:**

1. Rufus Anderson, *Memoir of Catharine Brown, a Christian Indian of the Cherokee Nation* (Boston: Samuel T. Armstrong and Crocker & Brewster, 1825), 9-10, 16-18, 22, 24-29, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/nc01.ark:/13960/t7kp8404h>. Public domain.
2. Anderson, *Memoir*, 34-36.
3. Anderson, *Memoir*, 37-40.
4. Anderson, *Memoir*, 44-49, 55-58.

Excerpts edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. Numbered section headings and italicized subheadings added by Duffy. Paragraph breaks adjusted for readability. A date note added to a diary entry for regularity. Letter headings reformatted. Quotation marks that enclosed letters or diary entries reproduced in the source publication have been omitted here, where those documents stand as independent selections.

Spelling, capitalization, punctuation, typography (italics, font size), and the formatting of a biblical citation emended in line with modern American conventions. Use of exclamatory *oh* vs. vocative *O* regularized. For the sake of modernization, some governmental and religious terms capitalized in the source publication have been converted here to lowercase (*state, council, treasurer, agency, scriptures*). Divine pronouns and the vocatives *brother* and *sister* (not followed by a name) are consistently downcased here, though inconsistently so in the source.

These edited excerpts from the memoir are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.

**See also:** Modern transcriptions of Brown's letters, made from the original manuscripts, are available in Theresa Strouth Gaul, ed., *Cherokee Sister: The Collected Writings of Catharine Brown, 1818-1823* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 61-67. However, the excerpts from the letters that are presented here, for the Empire and American Religion archive, are based on Rufus Anderson's 1825 printing of the letters, not on Gaul's more recent transcriptions. Comparison with Gaul's transcriptions shows that Anderson trimmed Brown's letters and refined her punctuation, spelling, grammar, and style. Nevertheless, Brown's voice predominates overwhelmingly, and Anderson's alterations are of little consequence for the teaching purposes that these excerpts are meant to serve (especially considering that the excerpts have been further edited here, beyond Anderson's emendations, for brevity and readability).



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