

**TRIANGULAR INTEGRATION IN A BLACK DENOMINATION:
JAMES SISSON, AFRICAN METHODISM, AND THE
INDIAN MISSION ANNUAL CONFERENCE**

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The African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC) is one of the most historically significant black institutions in the United States. Richard Allen, a former slave, launched this religious body in 1787 in Philadelphia and formally established it as a denomination in 1816. African Methodism spread throughout the North and Canada and then expanded exponentially after the Civil War among ex-slaves in the former Confederacy. A white minister, James Fitz Allan Sisson, played an important role in facilitating this AME development. Although he began his missionary activity in the South, Sisson made his most significant contributions in the Indian Territory, where he helped to found the Indian Mission Annual Conference in present day Oklahoma. While in this jurisdiction, he evangelized “full-blooded” Indians, black Indians, and black Southern migrants. Sisson believed that the AME Church identified with oppressed populations within the Atlantic World and was better equipped to reach marginalized communities than white religious organizations. His commitment to working within a black denomination made him unique among his white missionary peers. His effectual ministry also exemplified the multi-racial aspirations of this African American organization.¹

Sisson was active in establishing the Indian Mission Annual Conference in 1879 and he served in it until 1886. He constantly traveled to oversee various congregations and represented them in AME meetings. He founded churches and aggressively sought denominational funds to support them and their pastors. At the time of his death, the denomination, in recognition of his efforts, named a school in his honor. As an active minister and a founder of the Indian Mission conference, Sisson became well known nationally, especially to influential bishops like Daniel A. Payne and Henry M. Turner.²

¹ For more on the development of the AME Church, see Charles Spencer Smith, *A History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Philadelphia: Book Concern of the AME Church, 1922); Stephen Ward Angell, *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and African-American Religion in the South* (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1992); James T. Campbell, *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998); Lawrence S. Little, *Disciples of Liberty: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the Age of Imperialism, 1884-1916* (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2000).

² Daniel A. Payne, “Missionary Notices,” *The Christian Recorder*, March 3, 1866; “Personal Items,” *The Christian Recorder*, June 16, 1866; “Personal,” *The Christian Recorder*, April 21, 1881.

His whiteness, though noted by contemporaries, seemed a negligible factor in his relationships with AME peers.

Well known to historians are chronicles of black church expansion in the post-bellum South. Less familiar are initiatives that involved the evangelization of white missionaries affiliated with an African American religious body. Unlike his caucasian counterparts, who ministered to the freedmen through white controlled sectarian and missionary organizations, Sisson submitted to black ecclesiastical superiors and cooperated with African American associates. He evangelized and educated former slaves in the South and later ministered to their ethnically mixed compatriots who lived and migrated westward. Sisson's unprecedented ministry after the Civil War created a triangular racial integration between a few whites like himself and the black and Indian residents of Indian Territory. Though most studies view such relationships within white-controlled organizations, Sisson's activities showed the AME Church as an arbiter of interracial and interethnic interactions in American society.³

The Early Life and Ministry of Sisson

James F. A. Sisson was born on November 9, 1833, in Fall River, Massachusetts, the second of eight children of Thomas R. Sisson and Lydia Estes. His mother descended from the Durfee family of Portsmouth, Rhode Island.⁴ Although described as "A young man of fine talents and a fair education,"⁵ where he attained his schooling is unknown.

Sisson was one of many Northern white missionaries who labored among freedmen in the post-bellum South. He was unique, however, in his preference to work within a black organization. After the war, denominations like the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) hastened to the South to evangelize and educate the newly freed black population.⁶ These Northern Methodists appealed to blacks because they had opposed slavery, unlike the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS). Yet, both branches of white Methodists had plans for the former slave population. The MECS intended to create a "new paternalism," in which blacks had more autonomy, but remained under

³ Reginald F. Hildebrand, *The Times were Strange and Stirring: Methodist Preachers and the Crisis of Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1995); Clarence E. Walker, *A Rock in a Weary Land: The African Methodist Episcopal Church during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1982); William B. Gravely, *Gilbert Haven: Methodist Abolitionist* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1973).

⁴ William F. Reed, *The Descendants of Thomas Durfee of Portsmouth, R.I.*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Gibson Bros., 1902), 82-83; "With Sorrow," *The Christian Recorder*, April 5, 1888; Heritage Quest, *1860 Census*, Massachusetts, Bristol County, 2nd WD New Bedford, Series: M653, Roll: 490, Page: 512; Heritage Quest, *1880 Census*, Massachusetts, Middlesex County, 2 WD Newton, Series: T9, Roll: 546, Page: 35; Heritage Quest, *1900 Census*, Massachusetts, Suffolk County, 22nd WD Boston, Series: T623, Roll: 687, Page: 55; Reed, 82.

⁵ "Letter from Hannibal," *The Christian Recorder*, March 16, 1867.

⁶ In 1844, the Methodist Episcopal Church split over the issue of slavery. It became two separate organizations, the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The denomination reunified in 1939.

the influence of white Southern Methodists. To attain that goal, the MECS helped to establish the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (CMEC), an organization that had black leaders and clergy, but remained closely linked with the white denomination.⁷ Meanwhile, the MEC touted its antislavery heritage, its commitment to racial egalitarianism, and its devotion to education in order to attract black parishioners. Sisson probably began his missionary career in the MEC, but became convinced that the AMEC was a better institution for the freedmen. He recognized that during the era of Reconstruction, blacks needed to govern themselves without the sponsorship of a white denomination. Only then could they prove to a doubtful society that they could thrive as an autonomous people in their new era of freedom.⁸

Sisson began his AME career in the Baltimore Annual Conference, to which he was formally admitted in 1866. Under the auspices of this conference, Alexander W. Wayman spread the AME Church into Virginia in 1863. Sisson joined Wayman and other clergy in the Portsmouth area. In December, 1864, he reported the Portsmouth Mission as having “4 regular preaching places, and 5 places of occasional meeting; one meeting-house, at Jollife, without seats, doors, windows or steps; number of members, about 200, who have joined since November 27, 1863.”⁹ The meeting-house at Jollife, located roughly fifteen miles from Portsmouth, had previously been used by blacks, whites, and Indians. Sisson petitioned the denomination to send aid to “close the house in” with windows and doors. He explained that most of the members were former slaves with little money.¹⁰ By 1867, enough work had been accomplished in Virginia so that Wayman officially established the Virginia Annual Conference.¹¹ Sisson was fiercely proud of his particular contributions in Virginia. In 1887, for example, he corrected *The Christian Recorder* when the AME newspaper failed to accurately account for his role in founding the new jurisdiction.¹²

During the early years of his ministry, Sisson was also active in social justice organizations aimed at advancing black civil rights. In January, 1866, he attended a meeting of the Capital City Equal Rights League. This meeting was held in an AME church in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The president of the organization introduced Sisson, who spoke on the subject, “Progress and Equal Rights.” His address was well received by the members of the League, who proclaimed that he,

without coloring, portrayed the true character of our people; and, with a proper

⁷ Hildebrand, 3-27.

⁸ Hildebrand, 75-100; Gravely, 194-199.

⁹ “Convention of the AME Church in Eastern Virginia,” *The Christian Recorder*, January 14, 1865.

¹⁰ James F. A. Sisson, “Letter from Portsmouth, VA,” *The Christian Recorder*, September 3, 1864.

¹¹ Smith, 51-65; “49th Session of the Baltimore Annual Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church,” *The Christian Recorder*, May 5, 1866.

¹² James F. A. Sisson, “Correction of a ‘Recorder’ Statement,” *The Christian Recorder*, April 7, 1887.

sense of their condition, he earnestly recommends Moral, Intellectual, and Bodily improvement among them, looking forward to the day when they will be qualified to take their places in *their* country among the best men, and believing that they will soon obtain their rights before the law.

The League also awarded Sisson \$5.00 to support his mission work in the South.¹³

Sisson blended evangelism with his civil rights advocacy while he was in Pennsylvania. In March, 1866, one observer, Enoch Gilchrist, reported that Sisson spent four days organizing missionary societies in the Williamsport area. Sisson also planned an effort to collect clothing, books, and other domestic goods for needy Southern freedmen. Gilchrist observed that, "I have seen a great many men who profess to be our friends, of Mr. Sisson's color, but never came up with one equal to himself: he is both a gentleman and a Christian in every way."¹⁴ Other commentators echoed this assessment of Sisson as a tireless missionary and as one of the few white men who were truly friends to blacks.

Sisson also risked his life because of his close association with African Americans. The Ku Klux Klan and other vigilante groups regularly perpetrated violence against Northern whites like Sisson.¹⁵ In July, 1866, about twenty young whites arrived with clubs, knives, and pistols at a church in Ceciltow, Maryland, where Sisson was speaking. Though he bowed to threats and ended his speech, the assailants threw apples at him and one man hit him with a stick. A justice of the peace refused to act and excused these assaults.¹⁶ Such violence was typical during Reconstruction as Southern whites, furious at the destruction of the former slave regime, lashed out against blacks and their white allies.¹⁷ Because of his efforts on behalf of the AME Church, Sisson was vulnerable to such violence. As one AME explained, "It will be remembered that Rev. James F. Sisson is a white man, and the fact that he was doing Christian work among the colored people was considered a crime by these white 'gentlemen,' punishable with the use of pistol and club on her person." Other AME ministers faced physical peril for their work in the South, but like Sisson they persisted in their efforts.¹⁸

For several years, Sisson labored in the Georgia Annual Conference, where he served as pastor on the Ringgold Circuit in Catoosa County. Stationed at this appointment, Sisson faced other violent reprisals. His situation became so dire that he wrote to President Ulysses S. Grant in July, 1872, to explain the harassment he endured:

¹³ Samuel Bennet, "Letter from Harrisburg," *The Christian Recorder*, February 10, 1866.

¹⁴ Enoch Gilchrist, "From Williamsport, PENNA.," *The Christian Recorder*, March 3, 1866.

¹⁵ Sarah Bullard, ed., *The Ku Klux Klan: A History of Racism and Violence* 5th edition, (Montgomery, AL: The Southern Poverty Law Center, 1997), 6-15.

¹⁶ "Brutal Treatment of the Agent of the A.M.E.P.H. and F.M.S.," *The Christian Recorder*, July 14, 1866.

¹⁷ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Perennial Classics, 2002), 119-123.

¹⁸ "Brutal Treatment of the Agent of the A.M.E.P.H. and F.M.S.," *The Christian Recorder*, July 14, 1866; Walker, 67-68.

the insults consisted of all kinds of noises . . . such as mule noises, mocking persons blowing the nose, vomiting, Sneezing, yelling, Indian war whoop, and indescribable noises, too numerous to be counted. Indecent epithets have been applied to me, with snapping [sic] of the fingers close to my head, in the Post office, and upon the Streets Strings of bells—Cow, and Sheep—have been rung near my person, as I passed through the Streets, and once violently rung at the Post office door, while I was in the said office. Bricks and stones have been frequently thrown at me, while I have been passing through the Streets of the town aforesaid. Threats have been made to ride me on a rail, to drive me out of town, and to kill me. A man ordered me to leave the end of the town in which the Western and Atlantic Rail Road Depot is situated, and stated with oaths that he would whip me if I ever visited that part of the town again. Another man ordered me to leave town.¹⁹

Moreover, he was arrested under false pretenses and his church and its day school were threatened. His parishioners and their supporters faced similar physical threats. In addition to writing Grant, Sisson vainly petitioned local authorities for protection. Out of desperation, he asked the president to dispatch the military to Ringgold to protect him and the black community.²⁰ It remains unclear if Grant responded to Sisson's request. However, the petition shows yet again that Sisson faced bodily danger in doing his AME work. Whites seemed particularly galled that he was working within a black denomination, deferring to black bishops and presiding elders. Nevertheless, Sisson maintained his AME involvement through a transfer in late 1872 to the Arkansas Annual Conference. He became presiding elder on the Pulaski District, which stretched into the Indian Territory. For over a decade he developed African Methodism within an overlooked constituency of mixed black and Indian ethnicities.²¹

The Founding of the Indian Mission Annual Conference

When Sisson arrived in the Indian Territory, its population included ethnically diverse enclaves of blacks, Indians, and Afro-Indians.²² By the 1870s,

¹⁹ John T. Simon, ed., *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant, Volume 23: February 1-December 31, 1872* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2000), 408.

²⁰ Simon, 408-409.

²¹ "Synopsis of Proceedings of the Arkansas Conference," *The Christian Recorder*, December 7, 1872; "Appointments of the Arkansas Conference," *The Christian Recorder*, December 14, 1872; Richard R. Wright, Jr., *The Centennial Encyclopaedia of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Philadelphia: Book Concern of the AME Church, 1916), 10; *The Fifteenth Quadrennial Session of the General Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Tennessee, May 6, 1872*, 81.

²² The best works on black and Indian relations in the South and in Indian Territory are the following: Barbara Krauthamer, *Black Slaves, Indian Masters: Slavery, Emancipation, and Citizenship in the Native American South* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2013); Tiya Miles, *The House on Diamond Hill: A Cherokee Plantation Story* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2010); Celia Naylor, *African Cherokees in Indian Territory: From Chattel to Citizens* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2008); Gary Zellar, *African Creeks: Estabvste and the Creek Nation* (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 2007); Tiya Miles and Sharon P. Holland, ed., *Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds: The African Diaspora in Indian Country* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2006); Tiya Miles, *Ties that Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom* (Los Angeles: U of California P, 2005); Claudio Saunt, *Black White and Indian: Race and the Unmaking of an American Family* (New York: Oxford UP, 2005).

the Indian Territory was home to the Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole nations, also known as the “Five Civilized Tribes.” Living among them were black freedmen who had been enslaved by these tribes. Some of these black Indians had been removed from the Southeast in the 1830s with their Indian masters. Others had been born in the Territory and had lived among native people for their entire lives. The Territory also included various other tribes and, eventually, black and white migrants.²³

Initially, the AME congregations in the Indian Territory belonged to the Arkansas Annual Conference. AME ministers from Arkansas came to the Indian Territory around 1870. Among the earliest was Reverend Aaron T. Gillett, who served the Scullyville Mission in the Choctaw Nation. In 1872, he reported forty-two members and two churches, with a combined worth of \$300.00.²⁴ Several years later, Reverend Dennis Barrows received from Bishop Thomas M. D. Ward an appointment to the Fort Gibson Mission in the Cherokee Nation. Barrows attracted “large and attentive congregations,” including sixty Sabbath school students.²⁵

Sisson joined these clergy in establishing AME churches among the “ten thousand” black people who were “dispersed among the Indian tribes.”²⁶ This black population included the former slaves of Indian masters.²⁷ Sisson also evangelized various Indians tribes. In July, 1877, he reported to *The Christian Recorder* from Wewoka in the Seminole Nation that: “The bounds of my District are the bounds of the Indian Territory. I have visited its tribes, and peoples raised by them. I have nine quarterly appointments.”²⁸ Sisson remarked that he often used interpreters, a fact that made him feel that he was in a foreign country. In spite of these language barriers, he maintained both a day school and a Sabbath school.²⁹

By 1878, the AME Church embraced at least seventeen congregations in the Indian Territory. Gillett declared that the, “colored people and Indians

²³ Naylor, 1-23 and 192-197.

²⁴ John T. Jenifer, *Centennial Retrospect History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Nashville, TN: Sunday School Union Print, 1915), 102.

²⁵ Rev. Sisson, “Word from the Indian Territory,” *The Christian Recorder*, October 25, 1877.

²⁶ Jenifer, 103.

²⁷ According to the 1860 census, the overall Indian population in Indian Territory was 65,680. There were 7,369 black slaves owned by 1,154 Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, and Cherokee masters. There were also 404 free blacks and 1,983 whites living in the region. By 1890, the population in the “Five Civilized Tribes” was 178,097. Among these were 50,055 Indians, 18,636 black Indians and African Americans, and 109,393 whites. “Slavery in the Indian Territory,” *The Christian Recorder*, September 27, 1862; United States Census Office, 11th Census, 1890, *The Five Civilized Tribes in Indian Territory: The Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole Nations* (Washington, DC: United States Census Printing Office, 1894), 4; Charles Robert Goins and Danney Goble, *Historical Atlas of Oklahoma* (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 2006), 138.

²⁸ Rev. James F. A. Sisson, “Word from Indian Territory,” *The Christian Recorder*, July 12, 1877.

²⁹ Jenifer, 102-105; Rev. James F. A. Sisson, “Word from Indian Territory,” *The Christian Recorder*, July 12, 1877.

are friendly with us,"³⁰ yet most of the churches were struggling. Webbers Falls, for example, had only one member. Colhurts Station had a strong membership, but no pastor. The six-year-old Seminole Mission, on the other hand, boasted four hundred members and seven Sunday Schools.³¹ Sisson was stationed at Boggy Depot Mission, which included about thirty members. While serving at this mission, an unknown assailant attempted to shoot him, though the reasons why remain unclear. Probably, this was yet another example of whites lashing out against a white minister who identified with a black religious body.³²

In March, 1879, at the Arkansas Annual Conference in Little Rock, Sisson submitted a resolution for the creation of a separate conference for the Indian Territory. He stated that, "the distances by horse are very great from among the Indian raised brethren to and from the seat of the Arkansas Annual Conference." To increase efficiency in reaching these black Indians, he argued for, "the propriety, necessity, and duty of organizing an Annual Conference near Atoka, Indian Territory, on the first Thursday after the first Sabbath in September, 1879."³³ Sisson's resolution, which was unanimously passed, led to the official establishment of the Indian Mission Annual Conference on October 25, 1879, in the home of Billie Kelie of Yellow Springs. Bishop Ward presided over this first meeting and Sisson, along with members of the "Five Civilized Tribes," attended.³⁴

Bishop Ward gave a rousing address at the founding of the Indian Mission conference. He directly addressed the native audience, inviting them to join the AME Church. He began by stating that "[s]ince a boy I have heard of the Choctaw, Chickasaw and Cherokee Indians. I am glad to see you face to face and to tell you that Jesus died for the red man as well as the black man." Then, Ward added:

I remember that the red man once owned every foot of this country; but the red man is now passing away. The black man was brought here a slave, but he has increased to millions. The red man has been reduced to hundreds; the black man has no arms nor munitions of war showing that God is greater and mightier than these. In suffering there is a bond of sympathy between us, hence we bring you the black man that has equally suffered with you and been crushed; he brings to you the Gospel of Peace. We tell you of the "Man of Sorrows," who was acquainted with grief, who came to bind up the brokenhearted and to comfort them that mourn.

³⁰ Rev. A. T. Gillett, "Word from the Indian Territory," *The Christian Recorder*, August 22, 1878.

³¹ Rev. James F. A. Sisson, "Notes from the Indian Territory," *The Christian Recorder*, November 1, 1877; "African Methodism on 'The Little Rock,'" *The Christian Recorder*, January 24, 1878; Rev. A. T. Gillett, "Word from the Indian Territory," *The Christian Recorder*, August 22, 1878; Rev. James F. A. Sisson, "The Indian Conference," *The Christian Recorder*, January 6, 1881; Rev. James F. A. Sisson, "At Home," *The Christian Recorder*, November 17, 1881.

³² Rev. A. T. Gillett, "Word from the Indian Territory," *The Christian Recorder*, August 22, 1878; *Minutes of the Eleventh Session of the Arkansas Annual Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, held at Bethel Church, Little Rock, Arkansas, March 10, 1879* (Atlanta: Jas. P. Harrison & Co., Publishers, 1879), 21 (Statistical Table). Joseph F. Murrow Collection, Folder 10, Box 3, Oklahoma Historical Society Research Center.

³³ *Minutes of the Eleventh Session of the Arkansas Annual Conference, 1879*, 13.

³⁴ Jenifer, 103.

Ward concluded by saying that the “Indian driven back from the Pacific and bereft of land may take a stand, not as a bond slave or as a warrior, but as a Christian.” In this speech, Ward argued that blacks and Indians shared a mutual history of suffering, which enabled them to relate to Jesus, the “Man of Sorrows.” He contended that Indians could embrace a new identity as Christians and as African Methodists. Ward believed by adding Indians to its ranks, the AME Church was fulfilling its purpose, which was to be a beacon of hope and a place of spiritual renewal for the oppressed.³⁵

The Indian Mission Annual Conference

The Indian Mission conference functioned from 1879 until 1907, when Oklahoma became a state and the Indian Territory was abolished. The conference was then renamed the Central Oklahoma Annual Conference.³⁶ Sisson and his AME colleagues sought members from among “full blooded” and black Indians in the “Five Civilized Tribes.” The black denomination was “treated kindly” by the native population and even received financial assistance from them.³⁷ Meanwhile, black migrants increasingly populated the area after 1889 and the AME Church evangelized among them as well.³⁸

While the residents of Indian Territory were familiar with white religious bodies, they knew little about the AME Church.³⁹ AME ministers corrected this ignorance by sending information to Indian newspapers like the *Indian Journal* and the *Cherokee Advocate*.⁴⁰ Dennis Barrows, for example, informed the *Cherokee Advocate* about the progress of his Sunday school in Fort Gibson. The newspaper praised him saying, “He deserves great credit for the interest he is taking in the cause of Christianity among his people; and other colored [divines?] should imitate his noble example.”⁴¹ To inform their readership about the black denomination growing in their midst, the *Indian Journal*, probably through an AME source, explained that, “There are

³⁵ Jenifer, 103-104.

³⁶ *Journal of the Twenty-Third Quadrennial Session of the General Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church Held in St. John AME Church, Norfolk, Virginia, May 4-21, 1908* (Nashville: AME Sunday School Union, 1908), 236.

³⁷ *Minutes of the Fourth Session of the Indian Mission Annual Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, held at McAllister, Indian Territory, From October 26th to October 31st, 1882*, (Terre Haute, IN: C. W. Brown, 1883), 17.

³⁸ Goins and Goble, 138.

³⁹ Matthew Simpson, ed., *Cyclopedia of Methodism: Embracing Sketches of its Rise, Progress, and Present Condition, with Biographical Notices and Numerous Illustrations*, 4th Revised Edition (Philadelphia: Louis H. Everts, 1881), 472; also see the various reports from the Commissioner for Indian Affairs. For example, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior for the Year 1880* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1880), 279; *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior for the Year 1883* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1883), 240-241.

⁴⁰ The *Cherokee Advocate* was established in 1844 and published in the Cherokee Nation. The *Indian Journal* was established in 1876 and published in the Creek Nation. James P. Pate, “*Cherokee Advocate*,” *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture* (Oklahoma Historical Society, 2007); Linda D. Wilson, “*Indian Journal*,” *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture* (Oklahoma Historical Society, 2007).

⁴¹ *Cherokee Advocate*, January 1, 1878.

300,000 members on the rolls of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, that Church having been organized in 1816. It has one college, a publishing department, six bishops and many schools."⁴²

Indian newspapers portrayed the AME Church as a significant denomination and regularly reported on its affairs. For example, the *Indian Journal* announced the establishment of the Indian Mission conference saying, "Right Rev. T. M. D. Ward, Bishop of the dioces [sic] of Texas, has organized an annual conference in the Indian Territory."⁴³ The *Indian Journal* also reported on various AME meetings and on new ministerial appointments.⁴⁴ In March, 1885, it even chronicled the society wedding of the AME minister, J. A. Broadnax. Broadnax married Hannah Brown whose father, Simon Brown, was one of only a few blacks in the Creek Nation's senate.⁴⁵

Sisson himself appeared in Indian newspapers. For example, in June, 1879, the *Indian Journal* reported that, "Rev. James Sisson, of Atoka, presiding elder for this district held quarterly meeting last Saturday and Sunday on Sugar creek. The Sabbath school is flourishing, having 46 scholars in regular attendance."⁴⁶ In 1883, the *Indian Journal* published one of Sisson's letters regarding the progress of the AME Church:

I came here last Friday to hold Quarterly meeting in the pastorate of Eld. G. A. L. Dykes. I find his work in a prosperous condition; he reached here the second week in January, 1883. Since that time he has succeeded in erecting a chapel here and one at Muskogee; the one at Muskogee is under roof, and the floor laid, and \$50 assured for the carpenters when they call for the money. The chapel here is under cover, and the doors and windows are ready to be put in, with \$25 dollars in the treasury toward completing it. Elder Dykes has made a good impression on red, white and colored people.⁴⁷

With this report on Dykes, Sisson informed Indian readers that the denomination had the financial and organizational means to build and expand within the Territory's diverse populations.

Native residents of Indian Territory attended AME Church events, probably because newspapers had given such positive publicity to the denomination. Rev. J. F. Dyson reported that on June 24, 1881, Emmanuel Chapel at New Boggy Depot held an "examination and exhibition" of day school children. He contended that, "Our red brethren contributed a great deal toward the largeness of the audience. I do not know whether they came from mere curiosity or not; but I know they left commending the conduct of the meeting with panegyric that would do a royal feast credit."⁴⁸ In 1891, an "Indian

⁴² *Indian Journal*, March 25, 1880.

⁴³ *Indian Journal*, November 6, 1879.

⁴⁴ *Indian Journal*, November 6, 1879; *Indian Journal*, October 23, 1884; *Indian Journal*, October 30, 1884.

⁴⁵ "A Pleasant Evening," *Indian Journal*, March 12, 1885; United States. Congress. Senate. *Reports of Committees of the Senate of the United States for the Third Session of the Forty-Fifth Congress, 1878-1879* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1879), 695-696.

⁴⁶ *Indian Journal*, June 26, 1879.

⁴⁷ James Sisson, *Indian Journal*, August 2, 1883.

⁴⁸ "Church News," *The Christian Recorder*, August 4, 1881.

chief” spoke on the opening day of the Indian Mission Annual Conference. According to Bishop Ward, this chief, “spoke of the prejudice that existed in the heart of the white man towards the Indian and Negro. He said that it was nothing new in the history of the world for one race to try to crush out another, but that truth crushed to the earth, will rise again for the eternal world is hers. He said we were not to become disheartened by difficulties thrown across our path.”⁴⁹ This chief recognized the mutual oppression that blacks and Indians faced from whites and he believed that they could gain by allying with each other.

Some native leaders provided crucial support to AME churches. Green McCurtain, who served as the Treasurer and eventually the Principal Chief of the Choctaw Nation, was one such leader. McCurtain lived in San Bois, Oklahoma⁵⁰ and was, “one of the very largest land and property owners in the Choctaw Nation.”⁵¹ In 1894, *The Christian Recorder* reported that McCurtain donated a building just north of San Bois, which became the Greenrock AME Church. Pugh A. Edwards, probably a member of the congregation, called it, “the finest AME Church in the Indian Mission Conference,” and announced its dedication for late July.⁵²

The church at Bethel Point (or “Bethel-on-the-point”) exemplified the AME inroads among Indians. Bethel Point belonged within the larger Eufaula Mission, which included churches in Eufaula, Muskogee, and Elk Creek. In 1883, Eufaula Mission had 72 members, though it is unknown how many specifically belonged to Bethel Point. In 1886, Rev. Broadnax, himself a black Indian,⁵³ reported that most of Bethel Point’s members were “full blooded Indians,”⁵⁴ perhaps the only congregation with this ethnic makeup.

Although the members of the “Five Civilized Tribes” respected and supported the AME Church, they did not join the denomination in large numbers.⁵⁵ The legacy of slavery probably explains this situation. As historian Barbara Krauthamer contended about the Choctaw and Chickasaw, “Slaveholders and those who did not own slaves embraced a racial ideology that affirmed black people’s inherent inferiority and thus justified their enslavement.”⁵⁶ This point of view pervaded the other three “Civilized Tribes,”

⁴⁹ T. M. D. Ward, “On the Road,” *The Christian Recorder*, December 24, 1891.

⁵⁰ “Views of Green McCurtain,” *The Talihina News*, July 12, 1894 in Green McCurtain Collection, Box 20, Folder 5. Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.

⁵¹ “Editorial on Green McCurtain,” *The Caddo Banner*, February 23, 1894 in Green McCurtain Collection, Box 20, Folder 5. Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.

⁵² “Notice,” *The Christian Recorder*, July 5, 1894.

⁵³ “Religious News,” *The Christian Recorder*, December 16, 1886; E. Malcolm Argyle, “Multum in Parvo in Oklahoma,” March 2, 1893.

⁵⁴ “From the Indian Territory,” *The Christian Recorder*, September 16, 1886.

⁵⁵ There are no specific statistics regarding the number of “full-blooded” Indians in the AME Church. However, denominational records usually note the rare occasion when members are white or Indian.

⁵⁶ Krauthamer, 2.

though the Seminoles were seemingly more willing to embrace blacks.⁵⁷ These prejudices still existed throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and, combined with external pressures, caused these tribes to deny or limit their relationships with black Indians.⁵⁸ Sisson himself noted that, “The Choctawa and [illegible] have not adopted the colored people; and are constantly talking of driving them off of their tribes.”⁵⁹ So, while “full-blooded” Indians acknowledged the AME Church as a legitimate religious organization, most did not want to serve under black leaders and worship alongside former slaves.⁶⁰ Still, given the history of racial prejudice among these tribes, their openness to the AME Church seemed remarkable.⁶¹

Another impediment to Indian membership in the AME Church was competition from other denominations. The MECS had an Indian Mission Conference in Indian Territory. By 1876, this conference included five presiding elder districts, which encompassed thirty-one missions, twenty-five churches, and 4,159 Indians.⁶² The Baptists, Presbyterians, and Catholics also had significant missions in Indian Territory.⁶³ The competition between the MECS and the AME Church was palpable. In 1877, Sisson reported that the MECS approved of them being barred from a certain church building. After the incident, Barrows attempted to force the MECS to acknowledge his denomination’s presence. To achieve this, he sent a copy of *The Christian Recorder* to a pastor and a presiding elder of the white denomination. The elder refused to receive it, claiming that he did not have time to read it. Sisson responded by sending another copy of the newspaper along with a copy of conference minutes and a letter to the presiding elder and the pastor. Sisson exclaimed, “They know us now!”⁶⁴

⁵⁷ Naylor, 17-18.

⁵⁸ For an excellent depiction of this experience, see Zellar’s *African Creeks: Estelvsste and the Creek Nation*.

⁵⁹ Rev. James F. A. Sisson, “Word from Indian Territory,” *The Christian Recorder*, July 12, 1877.

⁶⁰ By contrast, Ojibwe Indians, who had not held blacks as slaves, embraced the AME Church. One such Ojibwe was John Hall, who became an ordained minister in the denomination and spread African Methodism among other native people in Michigan. See Christina Dickerson-Cousin, “‘I Call You Cousins’: Kinship, Religion, and Black/Indian Relations in Nineteenth-Century Michigan,” *Ethnohistory* 61.1 (Winter, 2014).

⁶¹ There is a historical precedent for this experience. In the Southeast, during the 1810s and 1820s, missionaries regularly had trouble converting Indians from the “Five Civilized Tribes,” but were successful in attracting blacks. Missionaries from the AME Church faced a similar phenomenon in Indian Territory. See Clara Sue Kidwell, *Choctaws and Missionaries in Mississippi, 1818-1918* (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1995) and James Taylor Carson, *Searching for the Bright Path: The Mississippi Choctaws from Prehistory to Removal* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1999).

⁶² The MECS also competed with the AME Church for black members. In 1876, the former had 281 black members in Indian Territory. Simpson, *Cyclopedia of Methodism*, 472.

⁶³ Simpson, *Cyclopedia of Methodism*, 472. *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior for the Year 1880* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1880), 279; *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior for the Year 1883* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1883), 240-241.

⁶⁴ Rev. Sisson, “Word from the Indian Territory,” *The Christian Recorder*, October 25, 1877.

Nonetheless, the AME Church persisted in its evangelization of the black Indians in the “Five Civilized Tribes.” Hence, churches were built in areas that they populated. For example, by 1883, the Indian Mission conference had churches in Big Creek and Fort Gibson. Big Creek was home to Cherokee freedmen like Peter Meigs,⁶⁵ Samuel Weber, and Maryland Beck⁶⁶ and the AME mission there was still in existence as late as 1907.⁶⁷ The AME mission at Fort Gibson Mission was available for black Indians like Irving Mann, another Cherokee freedman.⁶⁸

Still, it could not be assumed that black Indians would join this African American denomination and worship with the black migrants who belonged to these churches. Many had spent their entire lives among native people and culturally identified themselves as Indians and not as African Americans.⁶⁹ Some were initially hostile to the AME Church and skeptical of its legitimacy as an organization. In 1877, a black Cherokee impeded Barrows from using a church building, saying that he had “never heard of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and its origin and that it is controlled by colored Bishops. Such a Church is not recognized in the United States”⁷⁰ Presiding Elder Gillett faced similar incredulity. Writing from Fort Gibson in 1878, he stated that “a great many of our people here in the Indian country do not believe there is a colored Bishop, and will not until they see one.”⁷¹

AME ministers overcame such disbelief and made headway in the black Indian community. For example, Martha Dick, a Chickasaw freedwoman, and Jane Ward,⁷² a Choctaw freedwoman, were both members of the Atoka

⁶⁵ The Meigs School House, listed in 1882 as within the Vinita District, may have had some relation to him. *Minutes of the Fourth Session of the Indian Mission Annual Conference*, 14.

⁶⁶ *Testimony Taken by the Committee on Indian Affairs of the United States Senate in relation to the Condition of the Indian Tribes in Indian Territory, and upon other Reservations in Reports of Committees of the Senate of the United States for the First Session of the Forty-Ninth Congress, 1885-'86*, vol. 9 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1886), 13, 15, and 25.

⁶⁷ *Proceedings of the Twenty-Eighth Session of the Indian Mission Annual Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Held in Ward's Chapel A.M.E. Church, Muskogee, Oklahoma, Oct. 30th, Nov. 4th, 1907* (Nashville: AME Sunday School Union, 1907), 9.

⁶⁸ *Minutes of the Fourth Session of the Indian Mission Annual Conference*, 12; *Testimony Taken by the Committee on Indian Affairs, 1885-'86*, 33-34.

⁶⁹ Naylor, 197.

⁷⁰ Dennis Barrows, “Word from the Indian Territory,” *The Christian Recorder*, August 30, 1877.

⁷¹ A. T. Gillett, “A Word from the Indian Territory,” *The Christian Recorder*, August 22, 1878.

⁷² Jane Ward lived until age 108 and gave several interviews to the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s. Indian Pioneer Collection, Volume 30, Interview 7564. Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma; Indian Pioneer Collection, Volume 95, Interview 12532. Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma; Indian Pioneer Collection, Volume 95, Interview 0000. Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma; Indian Pioneer Collection, Volume 30, Interview 0000. Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma; Indian Pioneer Collection, Volume 95, Interview 6709. Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.

Mission in the 1880s.⁷³ Meanwhile, the Choctaw freedman Ben Nail was probably a member of the AME church at “Ben Nail’s settlement.”⁷⁴ In 1882, Lewis Lyons and Alfred Eubanks served as trustees at Turner Chapel in McAllister. Lyons and Eubanks were Creek and Choctaw freedmen, respectively.⁷⁵ In 1907, the Creek freedman Warrior Grayson served as a deacon at an unknown church in the Indian Mission conference.⁷⁶ Black Indians were being denied citizenship rights and even an acknowledgment of their existence within their Indian communities.⁷⁷ The AME Church, on the other hand, valued them and offered them opportunities for leadership. AME ministers were even willing to aid black Indians in their fight for citizenship. Broadnax worked with the Seminoles and Chickasaws “to assist them in getting the rights of the colored people and have them adopted in that nation as full-blooded Indians.”⁷⁸ These powerful enticements drew black Indians to the AME Church.

The AME Church recognized the financial benefit of bringing in black Indians. In 1891, one minister reported that the, “Cherokee Freedmen have just been paid off. This puts about \$75,000 in the peoples’ hands.”⁷⁹ According to the report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1891, \$75,000 was the amount appropriated by Congress to the Cherokee freedmen.⁸⁰ This minister hoped that they would use some of these government funds to bolster the struggling Indian Mission conference.

By 1907, the Indian Mission conference had five presiding elder districts and twenty churches located within the Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole nations. The most prominent of these churches was Muscogee Station, located within Creek lands. This church had 236 members and the building itself was worth \$10,000 and seated 500 people. The Indian Mission conference also had churches in all-black towns such as

⁷³ *Minutes of the Fifth Session of the Indian Mission Annual Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, held at Brazille, Indian Territory, From October 24th to October 29th, 1883* (Terre Haute, IN: C. W. Brown, 1883); 27-28; Oklahoma Historical Society, Dawes Final Rolls, <http://www.okhistory.org/research/dawes>.

⁷⁴ *Minutes of the Fourth Session of the Indian Mission Annual Conference*, 13; *Index to the Final Rolls of Citizens and Freedmen of the Five Civilized Tribes in Indian Territory* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2011), 140.

⁷⁵ *Minutes of the Fourth Session of the Indian Mission Annual Conference*, 16; Oklahoma Historical Society, Dawes Final Rolls, <http://www.okhistory.org/research/dawes>.

⁷⁶ *Proceedings of the Twenty-Eighth Session of the Indian Mission Annual Conference, 1907*, 11-12; Oklahoma Historical Society, Dawes Final Rolls, <http://www.okhistory.org/research/dawes>.

⁷⁷ See Saunt’s *Black White and Indian: Race and the Unmaking of an American Family* for an example of this experience among the Creeks.

⁷⁸ “Oklahoma,” *The Christian Recorder*, April 26, 1894. For an example of black Cherokees’ struggle for recognition, see Naylor, Chapter 5.

⁷⁹ “Fort Gibson P.E. District,” *The Christian Recorder*, March 12, 1891.

⁸⁰ *Sixtieth Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior, 1891* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1891), 250.

Red Bird, Clear View, and Boley.⁸¹ Prompted by the dissolution of Indian Territory in 1907, the 1908 General Conference renamed the Indian Mission conference as the Central Oklahoma Annual Conference.⁸²

Sisson as an AME Minister and Missionary

As a white minister in a black denomination, Sisson was unique among his missionary peers. There were numerous white denominations working in Indian Territory, but Sisson had determined years before that a black church was best equipped to minister to marginalized groups like blacks and Indians. In the numerous letters that he published in *The Christian Recorder*, Sisson never mentioned being treated differently than his black colleagues while in Indian Territory.⁸³ Other articles in *The Christian Recorder* mentioned his race, but never implied that it affected how he functioned as an AME minister.⁸⁴ Meanwhile, Indian newspapers in Indian Territory often did not mention his race at all.⁸⁵ For those Indians who held prejudices against black people, there was little that any minister, whatever his race, could do to convince them to join a black church. So, while the sight of a white man working in a black denomination might have been initially jarring, it was not a determining factor in whether or not someone joined it. However, Sisson's presence demonstrated that the AME Church was a racially and ethnically inclusive organization that he considered the best religious option for people of color.

As a presiding elder, Sisson visited each of his assigned churches every three months to convene a Quarterly Conference. In 1877, this required him to travel 900 miles on horseback to nine churches.⁸⁶ He also held a District Conference each year, which all of his pastors and delegates from the congregations attended.⁸⁷ In 1882, this included 10 churches among which were Okmulgee Mission in the Creek Nation, Wewoka Mission in

⁸¹ Christina Dickerson, "The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the Indian and Oklahoma Territories, 1893-1907," *A.M.E. Church Review* 123.406 (2007): 29-31; *Proceedings of the Twenty-Eighth Session of the Indian Mission Annual Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Nashville: AME Sunday School Union, 1907), Statistical Records.

⁸² *Journal of the Twenty-Third Quadrennial Session of the General Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church Held in St. John AME Church, Norfolk, Virginia, May 4-21, 1908* (Nashville: AME Sunday School Union, 1908), 236.

⁸³ For example, see Rev. James F. A. Sisson, "Word from Indian Territory," *The Christian Recorder*, July 12, 1877; Rev. Sisson, "Word from the Indian Territory," *The Christian Recorder*, October 25, 1877; Rev. James F. A. Sisson, "Notes from the Indian Territory," *The Christian Recorder*, November 1, 1877; Rev. James F. A. Sisson, "The Indian Conference," *The Christian Recorder*, January 6, 1881; and Rev. James F. A. Sisson, "At Home," *The Christian Recorder*, November 17, 1881.

⁸⁴ For example, see Enoch Gilchrist, "From Williamsport, PENNA.," *The Christian Recorder*, March 3, 1866.

⁸⁵ For example, see *Indian Journal*, June 26, 1879; *Indian Journal*, October 23, 1884.

⁸⁶ Rev. James F. A. Sisson, "Word from Indian Territory," *The Christian Recorder*, July 12, 1877.

⁸⁷ For example, see "Personal," *The Christian Recorder*, June 24, 1880.

the Seminole Nation, and Fort Gibson Mission in the Cherokee Nation.⁸⁸ Additionally, every year he attended the Annual Conference, at which time the entire the Indian Mission conference met. Lastly, every four years, he went to General Conference, which was in Nashville in 1872, Atlanta in 1876, St. Louis in 1880, and Baltimore in 1884. Sisson was a delegate at all but the 1888 meeting in Indianapolis.⁸⁹

Sisson tirelessly advocated for the Indian Mission conference. He drew attention to the financial struggles of the conference by publishing letters in *The Christian Recorder*. For example, in 1880 he wrote:

We have two presiding elders and ten pastorates, none of which are self supporting . . . If either of us presiding elders had even a meager support, it would much forward our work; if a single pastor's work was self-supporting, even that would largely improve our financial condition. Last year I received, everything all told, \$37; from a few white friends in Baltimore \$10, a mere total from all sources, \$47. . . . Since October 27th, 1878, I have not received \$5.00, all told. Our pastors last year and this have fared no better. For instance two are with me on my district since Oct. 27th, '79; one reports less than two dollars received, the other less than five. I have been to his house when children were crying for bread and his wife had none to give them.

He explained that his black Indian members were unaccustomed to supporting churches and ministers and were, therefore, slow to give or raise funds. He lamented that, "The rich white boards have paid the pastors sent to Indians"⁹⁰ and complained that his boards were not doing the same.

To overcome these obstacles, Sisson persistently sought support for the Indian Mission conference. He pled his case at the 1880 General Conference. He recalled that, "I think I talked with every bishop and delegate on the subject. I came home, and started with hard work and God's blessing to try to make my work a success."⁹¹ In 1881, he sent in two copies of the Indian Mission conference's annual minutes to ensure that his churches would be remembered in the denomination's tenth census.⁹² Sisson's missionary zeal became well known throughout the denomination. One contemporary even noted that he, "needs no introduction at our hands. The church knows him."⁹³ Further evidence of the respect that he garnered from the denomination was the fact that he, along with another minister, was chosen by the Bishops in 1883 to represent the AME Church at the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church.⁹⁴

Sisson's work eventually succeeded and he was happy to relay the news. In 1883, he proudly noted that, "As we have no commerce, or manufactures, and our congregations are small compared with those of the Southern States, the success I shall report seems wonderful, and really is." He continued that

⁸⁸ *Minutes of the Fourth Session of the Indian Mission Annual Conference*, 12.

⁸⁹ *The Christian Recorder*, April 5, 1888.

⁹⁰ Mrs. Alice Felts, "Our Missionaries to the Indians," *The Christian Recorder*, March 25, 1880.

⁹¹ James F. A. Sisson, "The Indian Missionary Work," *The Christian Recorder*, July 29, 1880.

⁹² *The Christian Recorder*, March 31, 1881.

⁹³ Sisson, "The Indian Missionary Work," July 29, 1880.

⁹⁴ "Personal," *The Christian Recorder*, August 16, 1883.

“Elder G. A. L. Dykes came here early in January. He has erected a chapel here, and one at Muscogee; the one at Muscogee is floored, and has the roof on, and there are \$50 secured for the carpenters, as soon as they call for the money. At this place the chapel is covered in, and the windows and doors are ready to be put in their places. The mission owes but \$40”⁹⁵ This positive report bolstered Sisson and inspired him to keep working.

In 1882, Sisson was an active participant at the yearly meeting of the Indian Mission Conference, held in McAllister. Sisson, who was then the presiding elder of the Fort Gibson district, opened the week-long meeting with a hymn, a reading from the Book of Psalms, and a prayer.⁹⁶ On the second day of the meeting, Sisson put forth a controversial resolution to require that all pastors wear robes while performing their duties. After a “spicy discussion,” the resolution passed, with Bishop Henry M. Turner taking his side.⁹⁷ On the fourth day, Sisson assisted Bishop Turner in ordaining new Elders, among them his friend A. J. Miller.⁹⁸ On the fifth day, Sisson gave his report as the Superintendent of Missions. He explained that illness had prevented him from fulfilling all his goals.⁹⁹ He claimed that the Parent Home and Foreign Missionary Society of the AME Church had not given him his due traveling expenses. He also lamented the poverty of the conference, a frequent complaint. He contended that he and his fellow ministers had little food and desperately needed the denomination’s support. Nevertheless, he declared that the conference was growing ahead of other black denominations. Sisson’s presiding elder district alone included 9 churches with 268 members.¹⁰⁰

At the 1882 Indian Mission conference meeting, Bishop Turner candidly admitted his initial doubts regarding the work in Indian Territory. He stated that, “I thought that Bishop Ward and Elder Sisson made a mistake in organizing this Conference.” However, their work eventually reminded him of a Biblical scripture that showed that church growth, while slow, could still achieve certain success. “So it is,” he said, “with all great enterprises.”¹⁰¹ Perhaps this early experience with “foreign missions” informed Turner’s later efforts in Cuba, Mexico, and Africa.¹⁰²

Sisson developed relationships with other AME missionaries in Indian Territory. For example, he became friendly with Rev. A.J. Miller, who recounted a memorable trip they took together in 1880:

⁹⁵ James F. A. Sisson, “From the Indian Territory,” *The Christian Recorder*, August 9, 1883.

⁹⁶ *Minutes of the Fourth Session of the Indian Mission Annual Conference*, 4.

⁹⁷ *Minutes of the Fourth Session of the Indian Mission Annual Conference*, 8.

⁹⁸ *Minutes of the Fourth Session of the Indian Mission Annual Conference*, 10.

⁹⁹ Throughout his ministry in Indian Territory, Sisson often complained of illness. For example, see James F.A. Sisson, “Notes from the Indian Territory,” *The Christian Recorder*, November 1, 1877.

¹⁰⁰ *Minutes of the Fourth Session of the Indian Mission Annual Conference*, 17-19, and 26.

¹⁰¹ *Minutes of the Fourth Session of the Indian Mission Annual Conference*, 4.

¹⁰² Dennis C. Dickerson, “Bishop Henry M. Turner and Black Latinos: The Mission to Cuba and Mexico,” *Religion, Race and Region: Research Notes on A.M.E. Church History* (Nashville: AMEC Sunday School Union, 1995), 121-127.

I received an appointment from Bishop Turner to the Indian Territory, where I am today. I left St. Louis for Indiana [sic] Territory with Elder Sisson. We had a very pleasant time on the way here. We reached Atoka, I.T., on Saturday morning at 2 o'clock, where I stopped for two weeks. I left there for Doaksville Mission, where my work is. We stopped at Caddo, where we spent the Sabbath, after holding Quarterly Conference on Saturday.¹⁰³

Miller was a useful ally for Sisson because he was well connected in Indian Territory. Miller was on good terms with R. A. Leslie, a Creek Indian who had helped to found a Baptist school for Creek freedmen.¹⁰⁴ Miller also knew John Q. Tuft, who was the United States Indian Agent in Indian Territory from 1879-1887.¹⁰⁵ In 1883, Miller related that he “[had] some business at Muskogee, with Hon. Mr. Tuft, the Indian Agent.”¹⁰⁶ Tuft was well aware of the situation facing black Indians and even reported on the issue in 1885.¹⁰⁷ Perhaps it was these issues that Miller discussed with him.

Sisson also advocated on behalf of the ministers in his conference. In 1883, he pled for funds for Brother Alfred Gross whose meeting house was “uncomfortable for worship and only partially seated.”¹⁰⁸ At the Annual Conference later that year, Sisson helped to examine and ultimately recommend Gross to attain his Deacon’s orders.¹⁰⁹ Sisson also encouraged the foreign missions of others. T. G. Steward claimed that Sisson was the only one who supported his efforts in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.¹¹⁰

Sisson strongly supported the educational efforts of the AME Church. He declared: “We greatly need to place our educational institutions upon a firm basis. We need to educate our own youth in our own way in order to retain them in our Church, and some of them as teachers and pastors in our schools and congregations. To allow other peoples to educate our young people is to relinquish our hold upon them in our Church and laborers together with us.”¹¹¹ The AME Church recognized the necessity of establishing schools in Indian Territory and the denomination was successful in doing so. In 1883, it was reported that Rev. George H. Brown established an AME school in Caddo and it became, “one of the largest in the Choctaw Nation run by the AME Church.”¹¹² Also that year, Bishop Turner made “a strong and elaborate appeal to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for some money to aid in starting and running some schools for the children of the Freedmen of the [Choctaw and Chickasaw] Nations.”¹¹³ The Commissioner granted him

¹⁰³ “A Few Words from the Indian Territory,” *The Christian Recorder*, July 15, 1880.

¹⁰⁴ *Eleventh Annual Report of the Board of Indian Commissioners for the Year 1879* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1880), 71; *The Christian Recorder*, May 18, 1882.

⁵ Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=T000406>.

¹⁰⁶ A. J. Miller, “The Indian Territory,” *The Christian Recorder*, July 26, 1883.

¹⁰⁷ *Testimony Taken by the Committee on Indian Affairs, 1885-’86*, 138.

¹⁰⁸ James F. A. Sisson, *The Christian Recorder*, January 25, 1883.

¹⁰⁹ *Minutes of the Fourth Session of the Indian Mission Annual Conference, 1882*, 15.

¹¹⁰ “A Card—From Rev. T. G. Steward,” *The Christian Recorder*, February 26, 1874.

¹¹¹ James F.A. Sisson, “Education,” *The Christian Recorder*, September 3, 1885.

¹¹² *Minutes of the Fifth Session of the Indian Mission Annual Conference, 1883*, 26.

¹¹³ *Minutes of the Fifth Session of the Indian Mission Annual Conference, 1883*, 21.

\$2,000, though it is unclear where he invested the funds.

By 1886, Sisson had left the Indian Territory to serve in the Mississippi Conference.¹¹⁴ It was here that he died in 1888 after falling off a horse. He never married, so only his mother and four siblings survived him.¹¹⁵ Sisson built his legacy as an AME minister in the Indian Mission conference. His whiteness, while noted by his contemporaries, seemed irrelevant to his effectiveness. He served as an able pastor and presiding elder and constantly advocated for his conference. Sisson established solid relationships with his colleagues and supported their missionary enterprises. Ultimately, the denomination named a school after him as tribute to his founding role in creating the jurisdiction and his advocacy of education.

The Sisson Industrial and Agricultural School had its origins in 1884, but was only officially recognized by the denomination in 1888.¹¹⁶ According to records from that year, the school was located in Muscogee, had 1 teacher, and 29 students.¹¹⁷ By 1892, the school had 2 teachers and 38 students.¹¹⁸ At the 1896 General Conference, the Bishops of the AME Church reported that “The Indian Territory has established and is maintaining the Sisson Industrial and Agricultural School. The Industrial branch is taught at Muscogee, Indian Territory. The Agricultural Farm is on Bluecreek, Indian Territory.” They added that “This school is of great importance to the children of the newborn freedmen; they do not get any benefits of the Indian Funds; they suffer greatly for proper facilities of education.” They also expressed their desire to assist the school in order to “perpetuate the name of one of our illustrious missionaries.”¹¹⁹

The Sisson school drew attention from observers outside of the AME Church. The *Christian Work: Illustrated Family Newspaper* discussed the school in 1897, saying that “It is entirely safe to say no that [*sic*] work among the colored people in this country and elsewhere is more practical in its aims and more worthy of generous support by the Christian public than the Sisson Industrial School, located at Muscogee, Indian Territory.” It further explained that the AME Church had been working in Indian Territory for twenty years, to the immense benefit of black Indians.¹²⁰ Another Christian publication, *The Churchman*, recognized the significance of the Sisson school. In 1899, the weekly magazine related that the black Indians, “have been almost

¹¹⁴ “The Mississippi Conference,” *The Christian Recorder*, December 30, 1886.

¹¹⁵ “Obituary,” *The Christian Recorder*, April 5, 1888.

¹¹⁶ *Department of Education, African Methodist Episcopal Church, Twelfth Quadrennial Report* (Waco, TX, 1932), 77.

¹¹⁷ *Journal of the 19th Session and 18th Quadrennial Session of the General Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, in the World, Held in Bethel Church, Indianapolis, IND., May 7, 1888* (Philadelphia: 1888), 148.

¹¹⁸ *Journal of the 20th Session and 19th Quadrennial Session of the General Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, in the World, Held in Bethel Church, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, May 2, 1892* (Philadelphia: 1892), 211.

¹¹⁹ *Journal of the 20th Quadrennial Session of the General Conference*, 80.

¹²⁰ “The Sisson Industrial School,” *Christian Work: Illustrated Family Newspaper* 63 (November, 1897): 841.

utterly neglected, and what they would be to-day were it not for the efforts of such institutions as the Sisson Industrial School at Muskogee, it is hard to conceive."¹²¹ The Sisson school continued its operations until 1916, when it morphed into Flipper-Davis Junior College.¹²²

Sisson was also remembered in works by AME historians. Richard R. Wright, Jr.'s *Centennial Encyclopaedia* (1916) stated that "Elder James F. A. Sisson, a white brother, was transferred from the Georgia AME Conference and was appointed as presiding elder by Bishop John M. Brown, over the Pulaski District, which included the Indian Territory, also. This brother labored assiduously with George T. Rutherford, Granville Ryles, and others to spread the African M.E. Church among the several Indian tribes."¹²³ Charles Spencer Smith's *A History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (1922) referred to him as, "a white man, who subsequently went to Arkansas and the Indian Territory, and continued a faithful servant of the Church until called to his heavenly reward."¹²⁴

Conclusion

Sisson's unprecedented ministry created a triangular integration between himself and blacks and Indians in Indian Territory. Through this integration, he was able to bring in ethnically diverse converts to the AME Church. These converts made the Indian Mission conference a successful endeavor that lasted for almost thirty years. Sisson earned the respect of his AME colleagues for his role in creating and sustaining this new conference. The establishment of the Sisson Industrial and Agricultural School proves this fact. While he could have easily joined a white denomination to perform his missionary endeavors, Sisson chose the AME Church. This speaks to his confidence in the organization and his belief in black self-reliance. Ultimately, the fact that he was a white man in a black institution was noted by his contemporaries, but it did not significantly hinder or help him. What mattered most to his parishioners were his ceaseless efforts on their behalf.

¹²¹ "Brevity," *The Churchman: An Illustrated Weekly News-Magazine* 79.17 (April, 1899): 618.

¹²² *Department of Education, African Methodist Episcopal Church, Twelfth Quadrennial Report*, 77.

¹²³ Wright, Jr., 10.

¹²⁴ Smith, 93.