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VIRTUAL VISION QUEST

led by Wanda Patterson, Chair

American Indians Committee

Fielding Lewis NSDAR

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Also available on our website [HERE](#)



Foreign Mission School, Cornwell, Connecticut

The Boudinots: a Cherokee romantic tragedy

The ancient Greeks and Romans employed a literary technique called *in medias res*,

starting in the middle of a story instead of presenting the narrative chronologically. I'm beginning the story of Harriet Gold *in medias res* and then telling you "the rest of the story." In 1825 Harriet Gold became engaged to a Cherokee man, Elias Boudinot. She knew her large family would not approve of the interracial marriage, so she told them secretly and separately. She most feared telling her brother Stephen, nearest her age, because she knew he would be horrified at the thought of her marrying an Indian! Thus, she decided to tell him the news by way of a letter. The two of them went into the parlor as usual after supper, and she locked one of the room's two doors as they entered. She handed her brother her letter, saying that she was engaged to Elias Boudinot. She locked the second door as she rushed out of the room, handing the key to her mother and telling her not to let Stephen out until he settled down. As she locked herself into her bedroom upstairs, she could hear Stephen screaming her name like a madman. She would not come out of her room until he promised to behave. To understand this scene, we must back up to Elias Boudinot's background and Harriet Gold's early life.

The man Harriet had chosen for her life's companion was Gallagina Watie. Gallagina meant "male deer" in Cherokee, so he was called Buck. Buck was the young Cherokee man Harriet had met two years earlier in her hometown of Cornwall, Connecticut. At age six little Buck Watie entered a small Moravian mission boarding school run by Rev. John Gambold and his wife Anna. Called Springplace, the tiny school was primitive by most standards, but Buck flourished there, soaking up his lessons like a little sponge. He was particularly touched by the religious teaching of the Moravians, and as a teen he declared that he wanted to be a missionary like the Gambolds. They arranged for Buck to enroll at the Foreign Mission School in the small Connecticut town of Cornwall. On Buck's way to Cornwall, his missionary escort introduced him to Elias Boudinot, an elderly member of the Continental Congress and President of the American Bible Society. Buck was most impressed by the gentleman, and assumed Boudinot's name, as was frequently the custom of young Indians who admired white benefactors. Thus, Buck entered the school at Cornwall as Elias Boudinot.

While little Buck was growing up to become Elias Boudinot, young Harriet was growing up to be a devoutly religious teen. She was the youngest of the fourteen children of Col. Benjamin Gold of Cornwall. Her grandfather was a Congregationalist minister. Three of her sisters married ministers. Her father and older brother Ruggles helped to found the Cornwall Mission School, and two of her brothers-in-law were officials in the school. Religion was at the center of Harriet's life; and she, like Elias, had announced at an early age that she wished to become a missionary. Her missionary efforts were to be directed at indigenous people in America. The stated purpose of the Cornwall school was to spread the gospel among the heathen people of the world, so Harriet's ambition fit in nicely with the school and with her family's close ties to missions and the school, as well as dovetailing Elias's missionary ambition.

In 1818 when Elias entered the school, most of the 20 students came from American Indian tribes or a few from lands as far away as Hawaii, India, and Tahiti. Most of the other students were still mastering English, while Elias spoke English perfectly with no trace of an accent. Most students were still dressed in the costumes of their people. Elias dressed in finely tailored suits and was always well groomed. Elias Boudinot was a rock star in Cornwall!

Students at the mission school were rarely allowed to leave the school campus or enter the homes of Cornwall residents. It was the position of the school, however, that their students could benefit greatly by being exposed to the niceties of white society, so they encouraged Cornwall residents to invite students to visit them occasionally to see how "civilized" families related to one another. The Gold family frequently entertained students in their home; and thus, young Harriet had numerous opportunities to become acquainted with the students, including Elias Boudinot.

The mission school curriculum included geometry, trig, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, astronomy, surveying and navigation, as well as traditional subjects such as English, history, and geography. During his four years at the Cornwall school, Elias distinguished himself as a

scholar, and he was baptized into the Christian faith. He planned to study religion at Andover Theological Seminary, but his plans were sidetracked when he became very ill, so he went home to the Cherokee Nation. When he left Cornwall, Elias began a two-year correspondence with Harriet Gold. Since none of their letters still exist, we don't know when the friendship between Harriet and Elias turned into romance; however, the two young people did not see each other for the two years of their correspondence. Nonetheless, they were engaged to be married at the end of that two years.

Harriet knew that gaining her family's permission to marry was going to be an uphill battle because of a recent scandal in Cornwall. A year earlier, Elias's cousin, John Ridge, also a student at the Foreign Mission School, had married Sarah Bird Northrup, a 16-year-old white girl in Cornwall. Although residents of the town were proud of the work of the mission school and its students, they reacted violently when they were acquainted with the intention of one of their own young ladies to marry an Indian! The scandal which ensued spread throughout the area. The newspaper editor in nearby Litchfield proclaimed that the intended marriage was a disgrace, blaming the mission school for encouraging race-mixing; and he blamed the intended bride's mother, who had probably promoted the marriage because the Ridge family was wealthy. He wrote that the marriage was "a disgrace to the relatives of the young woman...who has thus made herself a squaw, and connected her race to a race of Indians." The editor declared that folks in the community thought "the girl ought to be publicly whipped, the Indian hung, and the mother drown'd."

John Ridge and Sarah Northrop married, despite opposition and prejudice. They went to live in the Cherokee Nation, where John became a prosperous plantation owner and a leader in Cherokee politics.

With much trepidation, 19-year-old Harriet asked her parents' permission to marry Elias. Her parents and siblings reacted frantically to her request. They did not want their family name to be tainted by a scandal similar to the one the Ridge marriage had caused. Especially opposed to the union was Harriet's brother Stephen after she gave him

caused. Especially opposed to the union was Harriet's brother Stephen after she gave him her letter regarding the engagement. Word quickly spread throughout Cornwall about the intended marriage, and opposition included death threats. Harriet was secreted away to the home of friends in Cornwall to protect her. Looking down from her bedroom window at that house several nights later, Harriet witnessed her beloved brother and a crowd of young people burn images of Elias and her in effigy on the village green. Stephen threatened Elias's life if he tried to return to Cornwall, and the church community prevented Harriet from singing in the girls' choir at church on Sundays.

Newspapers from as far away as Boston and Providence ran editorials about the intended mixed marriage; and, of course, the Litchfield editor couldn't resist expressing his opinion. One of his editorials stated, "It appears that the orthodox fair ones at Cornwall have an overweening attachment to the Indian dandies educated at the mission school. Their love-smitten hearts are probably overcome by the celestial charms which their spiritual eyes discover in those tawny sons of the forest."

Letters flew back and forth among members of the Gold family, discussing "the subject," as they called Harriet's plan to marry Elias. Particularly hurtful to Harriet was an eight-page letter from her brother-in-law, Herman Vail, who had been assistant principal of the Foreign Mission School. He accused Harriet of placing her carnal desire to marry Elias above the welfare of the entire mission spirit of the school and the church as a whole. He said that her claim that she wanted to marry so that she could serve as a missionary among the Cherokee was merely an excuse for her selfish wishes. Following so closely after the Ridge marriage, her marrying another Cherokee student would destroy the school and its divine purpose to spread the gospel.

Another brother-in-law wrote to Harriet's brother Stephen: "Why must the school, and the cause of Christ, suffer so much? Ah, it is all to be summed up in this – *our sister loves an Indian!*...This wicked – this foolish – this unnatural & mischievous connection cannot be permitted to take place!"

The family tried to find a way to dissuade Harriet before she ruined herself, the family, and

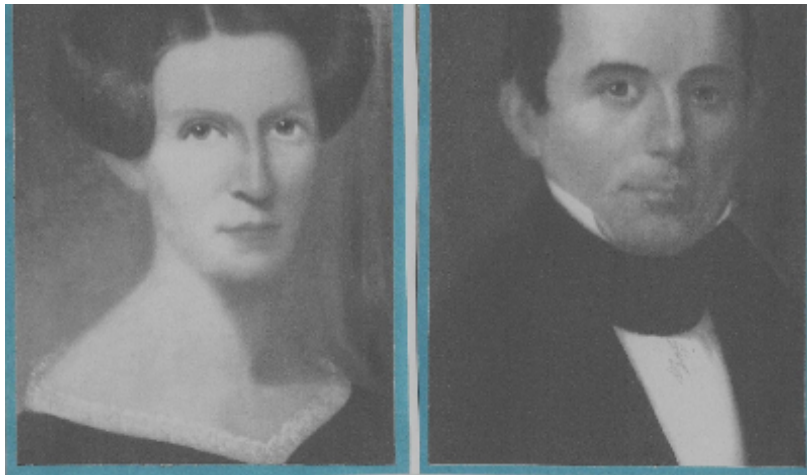
The family tried to find a way to dissuade Harriet before she ruined herself, the family, and the mission school. Both Harriet and family members received a multitude of letters expressing opposition to a marriage between a white girl and an Indian. Various religious leaders and school officials talked to Harriet, hours on end, but she refused to give up her intention to marry Elias and go with him to the Cherokee Nation as both wife and missionary. She stated unequivocally, "We have vowed, and our vows are heard in heaven; color is nothing to me; his soul is as white as mine; he is a Christian, and ever since I embraced religion, I have been praying that God would open a door for me to be a missionary, and this is the way."

When Harriet's parents refused to grant permission for the marriage, Harriet became deathly ill. She hovered between life and death for six months until finally her doctor told her parents they had two choices: either allow Harriet to marry the man of her choice, or she would likely die. Watching her grow weaker, Harriet's parents reconsidered their decision and wrote to Elias, granting permission to marry their daughter.

Brother-in-law Vail still opposed the marriage: "If she must die for an Indian or have him, I do say she had as well die, as to become the cause of so much lasting evil as the marriage will occasion. Better to die on the side of honor and Gospel sincerity than to pine away with satisfied love and its consequences on the bed of love."

Elias returned to Cornwall nine months later to marry Harriet. He wore a disguise as he traveled because there were still threats on his life if he came to town to claim his bride. The wedding was held quietly in the Gold parlor on March 28, 1826. Harriet's brother Stephen refused to attend, working in the sawmill, as did one of her sisters and her brothers-in-law. All were eventually reconciled to the couple, but her sister Abbey and her family were never willing to see Harriet again.





Harriet Gold Boudinot and her Cherokee husband, Elias Boudinot.

When the newlywed Boudinots arrived in the Cherokee Nation, they were warmly welcomed by their Cherokee family, the Waties, and their neighbors and friends. They served as missionaries at High Tower, a mission located in present-day Bartow County. Elias taught school, and Harriet labored in their temporary home, where eight mission students lived. She cooked meals for 10 to 12 people each day and kept up with laundry and other household chores. The next spring the couple built a house at New Echota, the capital of the nation, living across the road from the print shop where Elias became editor of the CHEROKEE PHOENIX, the bilingual newspaper sponsored by the Cherokee Council. In 1829 Harriet's parents came to visit for six months. Her father wrote the family back home, "Mr. Boudinot has much good company and is as much respected as any man of his age. His paper is respected all over the United States and is known in Europe.....{Harriet} has a large and convenient framed house, two stories...well done off and well furnished with all the comforts of life."

Harriet was especially popular among Cherokee women at New Echota. She taught them to spin, weave, and sew elegant Western attire not available locally. Her handmade bonnets were much in demand! She held quilting bees and taught her neighbors a variety of Northern recipes, since dishes at Cherokee meals, though plentiful, were somewhat bland. She was well known for her rice puddings. Harriet was a busy homemaker, hosting numerous houseguests who came to New Echota on business with the Cherokee government. Adding to her workload, Harriet gave birth to six children in ten years.

Harriet was most content with her life with Elias and her Cherokee family. On her sixth anniversary she wrote to her sister Flora: "I think it is this day six years since I received the hand of Mr. Boudinot and gave my own in the covenant of marriage. I now look back to that day with pleasure and with gratitude. Yes, I am thankful. I remember the trials I had to

that day with pleasure and with gratitude. Yes, I am thankful. I remember the trials I had to encounter – the thorny path I had to tread and the bitter cup I had to drink – but a consciousness of doing right – a kind, affectionate, devoted husband, together with many other blessings, have made amends for all...and if any tears have been shed for me on that account, I can now pronounce them useless tears.”

In 1836 tragedy struck the Boudinot family when Harriet died three months after giving birth to a stillborn child, her sixth baby. Harriet was 31 years old. Elias was devastated. He wrote to the Golds, “You cannot imagine the extent of my bereavement. I cannot express it. It is beyond the power of language to express. When I think of that dear individual – for ten years my endeared companion – one who was willing in youth to leave her parental home and friends for – ME – now no more – whose face I am never to see again in this world. Oh, it is more than human nature can bear.”

A lengthy obituary was published in the NEW YORK OBSERVER, containing the facts of Harriet’s brief life, including passages from the letter Elias had written to her family after her death. The article memorialized Harriet as a pattern of female benevolence and charity. The writer stated, “Harriet’s greatest happiness in life was to minister to others.”

Elias farmed out his small children to relatives and missionaries until he could decide what to do with his little family. Six months after Harriet’s death, he married missionary Delight Sargeant, gathered his brood, and moved to Arkansas first and then to the new Cherokee Nation in the Indian Territory after the Trail of Tears.

The larger population of the Cherokee Nation were driven from their homes and herded west on the Trail of Tears due to the Indian Removal Act of 1830 and the Treaty of New Echota in 1835. Elias had signed the 1835 treaty which sold the Cherokee homeland, thinking that there was no better solution to the government’s forced removal. Four thousand of over fifteen thousand Cherokees died on the Trail of Tears during the coldest winter on record; so the Nation as a whole blamed the treaty signers for the disaster. Elias Boudinot, John Ridge, and Major Ridge were assassinated as a result of their roles in signing the treaty.

Samuel Worchester, the missionary with whom Elias had labored to translate 11 books of the Bible, a hymnal, and religious tracts into the Cherokee language, wrote to the Golds, telling them about the assassinations and informing them that Delight would be bringing their grandchildren to them in Connecticut soon. He sadly summarized his feelings for his friend thusly: “I would that my beloved friend Mr. Boudinot had had no part in that

transaction {the Treaty}; yet I have no doubt of the sincerity of his own conviction that he was doing right, and hazarding his life for the good of his people. He was a great and good man – a man who, in an uncommon degree, exhibited the spirit of the gospel.”

Elias Boudinot was buried in Park Hill, Oklahoma, near the spot where he was assassinated. Harriet Ruggles Gold Boudinot was buried in a hillside cemetery near New Echota. Her tombstone was engraved with the opening line of a John Newton hymn she requested that her family and friends sing as she lay dying: WE SEEK A REST BEYOND THE SKIES.

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