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The U.S. history of Native American ^{Info} Boarding Schools

Written By Melissa Mejia

(TW: abuse, sexual abuse, mental health, suicide)

Native American Boarding Schools (also known as Indian Boarding Schools) were established by the U.S. government in the late 19th century as an effort to assimilate Indigenous youth into mainstream American culture through education. This era was part of the United States' overall attempt to kill, annihilate, or assimilate Indigenous peoples and eradicate Indigenous culture.



The Native American assimilation era first began in 1819, when the U.S. Congress passed The Civilization Fund Act. The act encouraged American education to be provided to Indigenous societies and therefore enforced the “civilization process”.

The passing of this act eventually led to the creation of the federally funded Native American Boarding Schools and initiated the beginning of the Indian Boarding School era. The duration of this era ran from 1860 until 1978. Approximately 357 boarding schools operated across 30 states during this era both on and off reservations and housed over 60,000 native children. A third of these boarding schools were operated by Christian missionaries as well as members of the federal government. These boarding schools housed several thousand children.



Native American Boarding Schools first began operating in 1860 when the Bureau of Indian Affairs established the first on-reservation boarding school on the Yakima Indian Reservation in Washington. Shortly after, the first off-reservation boarding school was established in 1879. The Carlisle Indian School located in Carlisle, Pennsylvania was founded by Richard Henry Pratt. He modeled the boarding school off an education program he designed while overseeing Fort Marion Prison in St. Augustine, Florida. He developed the program after experimenting with Native American assimilation education on imprisoned and captive Indigenous peoples. Pratt served as the Headmaster of the Carlisle Indian School for 25 years and was famously known for his highly influential philosophy which he described in a speech he gave in 1892. He stated, “A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one. In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.”



Attendance to the boarding schools was made mandatory by the U.S. Government regardless of whether or not Indigenous families gave their consent. Upon arrival, Native children were given Anglo-American names, bathed in kerosene, given military-style clothing in exchange for their traditional clothing, and their hair would be shaved off for the boys and cut into short bob styles for girls.

Education primarily focused on trades to make Native students marketable in American society. Male students were taught to perform manual labor such as blacksmithing, shoemaking, and farming amongst other trades. On the other hand, female students were taught to cook, clean, sew, do laundry, and care for farm animals. Standard academic subjects like reading, writing, math, history, and art were also taught, however, these subjects emphasized American beliefs and values. For example, students were taught the importance of private property, materialized wealth, students

were forced to convert to Christianity, and celebrate American holidays such as Columbus Day. Richard Henry Scott eventually implemented a “Placing Out System” that placed Native students into American communities for a certain amount of time, varying from a Summer to a full year. These programs tended to exploit students and used them for domestic and physical labor.



Native students were not allowed to speak in their Native languages. They were only allowed to speak English regardless of their fluency and would face punishment if they didn't. The discipline enforced at these boarding schools was severe. Punishments varied and included privilege restrictions, diet restrictions, threats of corporal punishment, and even confinement. Additionally, Native students were neglected and faced many forms of abuse including physical, sexual, cultural, and spiritual. They were beaten, coerced into performing heavy labor. Their daily regimen consisted of several hours of marching and recreational time consisted of watching disturbing movies such as Cowboys and Indians.

Since they were used as forms of punishment, food and medical attention were scarce. This led to boarding schools becoming more susceptible to infections and diseases like tuberculosis, the flu, trachoma. Due to these conditions, Native students would become ill and die at these boarding schools often. In 1899, a measles epidemic spread through the Phoenix Indian School, experiencing rates as high as 325 cases of measles in addition to 60 cases of pneumonia, and 9 student deaths within 10 days. Parents were rarely informed of their children's deaths; some parents would learn of their child's death after they were buried in school cemeteries. Some students were buried in unmarked graves. Those that survived these inhumane conditions were scarred from the traumatic experiences for the remainder of their lives.



Although a majority of Native children were forced to attend these boarding schools, some parents chose to send their children because those were the only schools available to their children. However, several forms of resistance were performed in response to having their children pulled from their homes and forced to attend these boarding schools. Some forms of resistance included entire villages refusing to enroll

their children in the boarding schools, coordinated mass withdrawals, as well as encouraging their children to run away from the school. Indian agents – individuals hired to interact with Indigenous communities on behalf of the U.S. Government – would retaliate by withholding rations and supplies to Indigenous communities. These agents were also responsible for seizing children from their families and their homes until boarding schools were filled.

While the Native American Boarding School era has ended, the U.S. government still operates a few off-reservation boarding schools. As of 2020, 7 boarding schools continue to be federally funded, 3 of which are controlled by Indigenous community leaders. In 1934, the Indian Reorganization Act was passed to decrease U.S. federal control of Native affairs and instead allowed for Native self-determination and self-governance. An example of this transition can be seen with the Santa Fe Indian School which was established in 1890 and originally implemented the Carlisle model. By the 1920s, the school began transitioning after Indigenous leaders fought to gain control over the school. It is currently managed by Indigenous leaders where the focus has switched to traditional arts, sovereignty, Native cultures, and community.

Native youth still face several challenges within the American education system. They rarely have access to curriculums that are culturally relevant to them and experience difficulties in the classroom at alarming rates. According to reports given by the *Kids Count Data Center* and *The National Violent Death Reporting System*, Native students are:

- 1.2 times more likely to be behind in 4th-grade reading and 8th-grade math
- 1.4 times more likely to be suspended from school
- 1.5 times more likely to die in a homicide or suicide
- 1.7 times more likely to experience two or more adverse childhood experiences
- 1.8 times more likely to attend a high-poverty school
- 2.0 times more likely to drop out of high school

The tragedies Native children faced during this era have impacted the lives of not only the children but also their families and communities. These impacts have caused Indigenous communities to experience deep-rooted ramifications in regards to mental

health and the overall relationship between Native communities and the American education system. They are often displayed in the form of poverty, difficulties in the American education system, poor physical health, and poor mental health. Many Native students who survived the boarding school era went on to suffer from mental health and other related issues such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, a lack of cultural identity, and the development of negative stereotypes (i.e. lazy, alcoholics, etc.), to name a few. These traumatic experiences have been passed down from generation to generation and continue to impact Indigenous communities today.

Documentaries

Unspoken: America's Native American Boarding Schools ([PBS Utah](#))

Unseen Tears: The Native American Boarding School Experience in Western New York, 2009 ([Films for Action](#))

Literature

Code Talker: The First and Only Memoir By One of the Original Navajo Code Talkers of WWII by Chester Nez and Judith Schiess Avila

Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928 by David Wallace Adams

They Called it Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School by K. Tsianina Lomawaima

Pipestone: My Life in an Indian Boarding School by Adam Fortunate Eagle

Websites

[Additional Book Recommendations from The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition](#)

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Melissa Mejia

Melissa is a 25 year old Dominican-American from Philly. She is part of the writing team at TIF and writes articles. She enjoys hiking, reading, relaxing with her cat and hopes to expand knowledge in climate change impacts on BIPOC communities and spread awareness through The Indigenous Foundation.

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STATUTE II.

March 3, 1819.

[Obsolete.]
Act of April
19, 1816, ch. 57.
Instead of
four sections,
&c., any con-
tiguous quarter
sections, frac-
tions, &c., may
be located un-
der direction of
the legislature.

CHAP. LXXXIII.—*An Act respecting the location of certain sections of lands to be granted for the seat of government in the state of Indiana.*

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America, in Congress assembled, That instead of four sections, provided to be located under the direction of the legislature of the state of Indiana, and to be granted for the purpose of fixing thereon the seat of government for that state, it shall be lawful to locate, for that purpose, under the direction of the legislature aforesaid, any contiguous quarter sections, fractions, or parts of sections, not to exceed, in the whole, the quantity contained in four entire sections: Such locations shall be made before the commencement of the public sales of the adjoining and surrounding lands, belonging to the United States.

APPROVED, March 3, 1819.

STATUTE II.

March 3, 1819.

[Obsolete.]

Appropriations for finishing the wings of the Capitol.

Centre building.

Gates, iron railing, &c.,

Enlarging of-
fices west of
President's
house.

Purchasing a
lot of land, and
supplying the
executive of-
fices with water.
To be paid out
of money in the
treasury.

CHAP. LXXXIV.—*An Act making appropriations for the public buildings, for the purchase of a lot of land, and furnishing a supply of water for the use of certain public buildings.*

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America, in Congress assembled, That there be appropriated for finishing the wings of the Capitol, in addition to the sums already appropriated, the further sum of fifty-one thousand three hundred and thirty-two dollars.

For erecting the centre building of the Capitol, one hundred and thirty-six thousand six hundred and forty-four dollars.

For finishing the gates, the iron railing, and the enclosure north of the President's house, five thousand three hundred and forty-four dollars.

For enlarging the offices west of the President's house, eight thousand one hundred and thirty-seven dollars.

For purchasing a lot of land, and for constructing pipes, for supplying the executive offices and President's house with water, nine thousand one hundred and twenty-five dollars.

Which said several sums of money, hereby appropriated, shall be paid out of any money in the treasury not otherwise appropriated.

SEC. 2. *And be it further enacted,* That the several sums hereby appropriated, shall be expended under the direction of the President of the United States.

APPROVED, March 3, 1819.

STATUTE II.

March 3, 1819.

The President authorized to employ capable persons to instruct Indians in agriculture, and to teach Indian children reading, writing and arithmetic, &c.

CHAP. LXXXV.—*An Act making provision for the civilization of the Indian tribes adjoining the frontier settlements.*

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America, in Congress assembled, That for the purpose of providing against the further decline and final extinction of the Indian tribes, adjoining the frontier settlements of the United States, and for introducing among them the habits and arts of civilization, the President of the United States shall be, and he is hereby authorized, in every case where he shall judge improvement in the habits and condition of such Indians practicable, and that the means of instruction can be introduced with their own consent, to employ capable persons of good moral character, to instruct them in the mode of agriculture suited to their situation; and for teaching their children in reading, writing, and arithmetic, and performing such other duties as may be enjoined, according to such in-

structions and rules as the President may give and prescribe for the regulation of their conduct, in the discharge of their duties.

SEC. 2. *And be it further enacted*, That the annual sum of ten thousand dollars be, and the same is hereby appropriated, for the purpose of carrying into effect the provisions of this act; and an account of the expenditure of the money, and proceedings in execution of the foregoing provisions, shall be laid annually before Congress.

APPROVED, March 3, 1819.

Account of expenditure and proceedings to be laid before Congress.

STATUTE II.

March 3, 1819.

CHAP. LXXXVI.—*An Act explanatory of the act entitled "An act for the final adjustment of land titles in the state of Louisiana and territory of Missouri."*

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America, in Congress assembled, That the provisions of the fifth section of the act of Congress, entitled "An act for the final adjustment of land titles in the state of Louisiana and territory of Missouri," passed the twelfth day of April, one thousand eight hundred and fourteen, shall be so construed as to extend to the citizens of the county of Howard, in the Missouri territory, as established by the act of the legislature of the territory, passed the twenty-third day of January, one thousand eight hundred and sixteen, any construction to the contrary notwithstanding.

SEC. 2. *And be it further enacted*, That the right of pre-emption given by the aforesaid provisions, as explained and extended by this act, shall not be so construed as to affect any right derived from the United States, by purchase, at public or private sale, of the lands claimed under the aforesaid act.

SEC. 3. *And be it further enacted*, That any person or persons who have settled on, and improved, any of the lands in the said territory, reserved for the use of schools, before the survey of such lands were actually made, and who would have had the right of pre-emption thereto by the existing laws had not the same been so reserved, shall have the right of pre-emption thereto, under the same terms and conditions, and subject to the same restrictions provided for other cases of a right of pre-emption in said territory and the register of the land office, and receiver of public moneys for the district, shall have power to select any other vacant and unappropriated lands, in the same township, and as near adjacent as lands of equal quantity and like quality can be obtained, in lieu of the section, or parts of a section, which shall have been entered in right of pre-emption, according to the provision of this section.

APPROVED, March 3, 1819.

Act of April 12, 1814, ch. 52. The provisions of the 5th section of the act of 12th April, 1814, to be construed to extend to citizens of Howard county.

The right of pre-emption.

Persons who would have had the right of pre-emption had not the lands been reserved for schools, to have the right of pre-emption, &c.

STATUTE II.

March 3, 1819.

CHAP. LXXXVII.—*An Act making appropriations to carry into effect treaties concluded with several Indian tribes therein mentioned.*

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America, in Congress assembled, That for the purpose of carrying into effect a treaty between the United States and the Wyandot, Seneca, Delaware, Shawanee, Pattawatima, Ottawa, and Chippewa tribes of Indians, concluded at the foot of the rapids of the Miami of Lake Erie, on the twenty-ninth day of September, eighteen hundred and seventeen, and the supplementary treaty concluded with said tribes, at St. Mary's, in the state of Ohio, on the seventeenth of September, eighteen hundred and eighteen, the following sums be, and the same are hereby appropriated, in conformity with the stipulations contained in said treaty and supplement, to wit:

The sum of thirteen thousand three hundred dollars, for the payment

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Appropriations for carrying into effect treaties with the Wyandots, Senecas, Delawares, Shawanees, Pattawatimas, Ottawas, and Chippewas.

Annuities.