Researching Children in Indian Boarding Schools

Judy Nimer Muhn



Recent news stories about the unidentified burials at First Nations residential schools in Canada have spotlighted a period that is not well-known beyond the Indigenous communities of North America. In the summer of 2021, the remains of thirteen hundred children were found in unmarked graves at schools in British Columbia, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan.¹ These Native children were among the hundreds of thousands relocated to boarding schools in Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, due to the forced assimilation policies of these countries.²

Websites cited in this article were viewed on 24 November 2021.

Student body lined up at Carlisle Indian Industrial School, about 1900. Wikimedia Commons(https:// commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Carlisle_pupils.jpg).

Judy Nimer Muhn is a professional genealogist, lecturer, and researcher based in Milford, Michigan, who specializes in Indigenous, French-Canadian, and Michigan research. She has traced her ancestors to the Métis people of Canada and is Hunka Oglala Lakota from the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Judy is a member of the NGS Board of Directors.

^{1.} Ian Mosby and Erin Millions, "Canada's Residential Schools Were a Horror," 1 August 2021, *Scientific American* (https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/canadas-residential-schools-were-a-horror).

^{2.} Jon Reyhner and Navin Kumar Singh, "Cultural Genocide in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States: The Destruction and Transformation of Indigenous Cultures," *Indigenous Policy Journal* vol. XXI, no. 4 (Winter 2010), 1; digital images, http:// www.indigenouspolicy.org/index.php/ipj/article/view/23. About 150,000 Indigenous children attended 139 residential schools in Canada; "Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement," *Government of Canada* (https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1100100015576/1571 581687074).

American Indian Boarding Schools by State

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Nabama 🕦	Nenahnezad Indian School* Phoenix Indian School	Great Nemaha Indian School Kaw Manual Labor School	Nevada 3
bury Manual Labor School and Mission	Pima	Kickapoo	Stewart Indian School
			Fort McDermitt
	Pine Springs	Osage Manual Labor School/St. Francis Potowatamie Manual Labor School	Western Shoshone Indian School
laska 🚯 💦	Pinon Rice Station		
chorage*		Shawnee Mission Manual Labor School	New Mexico 26
vik Mission (Christ Church)	Rocky Ridge*		New Mexico 20
hel Regional High School	Rough Rock Community School*	Michigan 5	Albuquerque Indian School (Indian Pueblo
outla WA	Sacaton San Contas	Holy Childhood of Jesus School	Training School)
per Valley	San Carlos	Holy Name (Chippewa) Baraga	Bernalillo
enant High School	Santa Rosa Ranch*	Mount Pleasant Industrial	Chichiltah/Jones Ranch
Iglas Island Friends Mission School	SebaDalkai	Pottawatomie	Ch'ooshgai Community (Chuska)*
utna (Tyonek)	Shonto Indian School* (Shonto Preparatory	St. Joseph's Orphanage	Crownpoint Indian School*
banks*	Technology HS)*		Dzilth-Na-0-Dith-Hle Community School*
ends High School	Theodore Roosevelt	Minnesota 🚯	Fort Wingate Indian School*
ena* OR	St. Michaels Industrial*		Jicarilla Apache
y Cross	St. Johns Mission at Gila Crossing	Cass/Leech Lake	Lake Valley Indian School
see Lee	Teec Nos Pos	Clontarf (St. Paul's Industrial School)	Mescalero Apache
akanak (Dillingham-Kanakanak)	Toyei ID	Convent of our Lady of the Lake	Navajo Prep*
iak Aleutian Regional High School	Truxton Canyon	Cross Lake	Nenannezed*
orefsky	Tuba City**	Morris Industrial (Sisters of Mercy)	Ojo Encino Indian School*
unt Edgecumbe**	Tucson Indian Training School	Pine Point	Pine Hill*
ana	Western Navajo	Pipestone Indian School	Pueblo Bonito
nana High School**	Wide Ruins	Red Lake	Pueblo Pintado Indian School
napitsinghak Moravian Children's Home	Wide Ruins Community School*	St. Benedict's Orphan School (St. Joseph's	Rehoboth Christian School*
ner*	Vanalia	Academy)	San Juan
mer House	California 10	St. Francis Xavier's Industrial School	Santa Fe Indian School*
s Tenth Mission	Fort Bidwell Indian School	St. Mary's Mission*	

"American Indian Boarding Schools by State," National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (https://boardingschoolhealing.org/list).

In June 2021, Deb Haaland, Laguna Pueblo and first Native Secretary of the US Department of the Interior, announced an investigation of Indian boarding schools in the United States. The Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative will identify boarding school facilities, locate burial sites, and document the names and tribal membership of children interred in these sites. A final report will be submitted by 1 April 2022.³

This article discusses the history and records of Indian boarding schools in the United States. The total number of Indigenous children in United States boarding schools is not known, since the records are dispersed in public archives and private collections,⁴ but nineteen thousand children lived in Indian boarding schools in the United States in 1925 alone.⁵ The Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition has documented 367 boarding schools in twenty-nine states.⁶ Native students also attended day schools, mission schools, and public schools on reservations.

History of the boarding schools

Secretary Haaland's 22 June 2021 memorandum to Department of Interior staff summarizes the history and legacy of Indian boarding schools in the United States.

^{3. &}quot;Secretary Haaland Announces Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative," 22 June 2021, US Department of the Interior (https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/secretary-haaland-announces-federal-indian-boarding-school-initiative).

^{4. &}quot;Healing Voices Volume 1: A Primer on American Indian and Alaska Native Boarding Schools in the U.S.," June 2020, National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.187/ee8.a33.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/NABS-Newsletter-2020-7-1-spreads.pdf), 6.

^{5.} David Wallace Adams, Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875–1928 (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995; revised 2020), 320.

^{6. &}quot;American Indian Boarding Schools by State," National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (https://boardingschoolhealing.org/list). Seventy-three schools are still open and fifteen board students. Current schools focus on serving Native communities.

Beginning with the Indian Civilization Act of 1819 and running through the 1960s, the United States enacted laws and implemented policies establishing and supporting Indian boarding schools across the Nation. During that time, the purpose of Indian boarding schools was to culturally assimilate Indigenous children by forcibly relocating them from their families and communities to distant residential facilities where their American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian identities, languages, and beliefs were to be forcibly suppressed.

In most instances, Indigenous parents could not visit their children at these schools. Many students endured routine injury and abuse. Some perished and were interred in unmarked graves. Survivors of the traumas of boarding school policies carried their memories into adulthood as they became the aunts and uncles, parents, and grandparents to subsequent generations. The loss of those who did not return left an enduring need in their families for answers that, in many cases, were never provided. Distance, time, and the scattering of school records have made it more difficult, if not impossible, for their families to locate a loved one's final resting place and bring closure through the appropriate ceremonies.⁷

In cooperation with fourteen Christian denominations, the United States government adopted a policy to enforce the relocation and reprogramming of Indigenous children throughout the United States in Indian boarding schools. The goal was to achieve what battles, massacres, removals, and other methods had failed to accomplish: the systematic destruction of Native cultures.8

Captain Richard Henry Pratt, founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, described the philosophy of Indian boarding schools in this way: "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... Transfer the savage born-infant to the surroundings of civilization, and he will grow to possess a civilized language and habit."9

In the early years of the boarding schools, students were forced to attend. Taken from their families, students tried to escape on the train rides from their homes or run away from the schools, only to be caught nearby. The Native names of children were changed to English names, they were punished for speaking their own languages, and they were forced to convert to Christianity. The trauma, heartbreak, loneliness, and homesickness expressed in letters and the stories of survivors are documented in the Recommended Resources list. I have used these resources to understand the stories I was told.

What were the schools like?

My own research, stories from my Unci (grandmother), and books about the schools confirm that they were poorly maintained, employees abused children physically and sexually, and discipline ranged from harsh to violent. Diseases ravaged the schools, where inadequate nutrition and medical care were the norm. Unci called her school "the Gravy Institute" due to the ubiquitous gravy poured on everything.

Children in the schools were as young as five or six. Most students returned home by the equivalent of a seventh or eighth grade education. Students in their teens could find employment to help their families. Many families came to see the schools as places to send their children when circumstances on reservations or during the Great Depression created significant hardships.¹⁰ One of my nieces placed two of her children in a Catholic boarding school when she was experiencing challenges in obtaining work and making rent payments.

The education provided included English spelling and grammar, handwriting, and basic mathematics; home economics skills such as sewing, cooking, and housekeeping for girls; and trades such as carpentry, construction, farming, and manual labor for boys. Many schools had programs called outings where children were placed in White homes in the community to serve as domestic servants,

^{7.} Deb Haaland, "Subject: Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative," 22 June 2021, Department of the Interior (https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/

Deb Haland, Subject: rederal indian boarding School Initiative, 22 Julie 2021, Department of the Interior (https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/si

^{10.} Brenda J. Child, Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900-1940 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 12-15.

Student Records
All Files Date of Entry Document Types Nations and Tribes People
The Student Records section features digitized copies of paper records on individual students at the school. These records were maintained by the administrative offices at the school during its operation. A variety of information about each student may be found within these files, including family background and age as well as admission and discharge dates. School activities, health, outings, and post-departure activities are also frequently noted. Individuals may have multiple sets of records associated with them.
Explore Student Records
Displaying 1 - 25 of 17650 records
Year of Entry Nation or Tribe Document Types in this File
- Any - • - Any - • - Any - •
Title/Student name contains
Sort by Order Items per page Date of Entry v Ascending v 25 v Apply

"Student Records," Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center, Dickinson College (https:// carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/student_records).

housekeepers, laborers, or farm hands.¹¹ The children received pay for their labor and, given conditions on their reservations, sometimes stayed through the summer to earn money for their families.

Older family members may be extremely reluctant to discuss their boarding school experiences, so sensitivity is important. Spending time with elders to draw out small details slowly

and carefully can provide hints for further research without triggering a negative response from a person harboring significant trauma. The stories of survivors I have heard emerged gradually, over long periods of time and often in pieces, because sharing the trauma is so painful. Patience, understanding, and respectful conversation are key to a researcher's success.

Researching boarding schools

To find student records, start by looking for boarding schools that were open during the period of the person's childhood. The location of a school is also a consideration, although many children were sent to schools far from their homes.

Carlisle Indian Industrial School

The amount of information available for each of the boarding schools varies. One of the largest, with the most accessible information, is the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, founded in 1879 as the first government-run boarding school for Native children.¹² The school closed in 1918.

The Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center (https:// carlisleindian.dickinson.edu) has

a searchable database of extensive resources: 17,650 student records including the English names and Native names of children; 6,697 digitized documents; 3,527 images; 1,727 newspapers and magazines; and a compilation of data for 180 children buried in the school's cemetery. New content is added to the site daily. A guide contains examples of Carlisle

		IDIAN INDUSTRIAL SCHOOL. D HISTORICAL RECORD OF STUDENT.	
NUMBER 446	English NAME Reuben	AGENCY Rosebud	Siony
BAND Wahrah	rah Kills the Enerny	HOME ADDRESS Duick Bear & Chief	}
PARENTS LIVING OF		AGE HEIGHTH WEIGHT	FORCED INSP. FORCED EXPR. SEX. 29 27 M.
ARRIVED AT SCHOO		DATE DISCHARGED	CAUSE OF DISCHARGE

Student information card, Reuben Quick Bear (Kills the Enemy); RG 75, Series 1328, box 2, National Archives.

NAME	AT CARLISLE	203 REPORT AFT Reuber	rer leaving ca L. Qui	RLISLE ch Bear	44Teg7 3M-0-09
DATE	INFORMATION THROUGH	ADDRESS	OCCUPATION	ITEMS OF INTEREST	GRADE
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1911	Seef		Com. millette Co.,	5.0	
	J				

Student file, Reuben Quick Bear (Kills the Enemy); RG 75, Series 1327, box 37, folder 1803, National Archives.

^{11.} Child, Boarding School Seasons, 81-84.

^{12.} The Carlisle Indian School Project provides information and pictures at https://carlisleindianschoolproject.com.

Indian School documents including medical/physical records, outing records and evaluations, applications for enrollment, and letters.¹³

The Carlisle School represented a pan-tribal population of students—from Abenaki and Alaskans to Yuma and Zuni.¹⁴ For researchers who think a relative lived in a boarding school, the Carlisle Indian School is a good place to start.

Other boarding schools

Other large and well-known boarding schools include Haskell Institute in Kansas, Sherman Institute in California, Chilocco School in Oklahoma, Chemawa Indian School in Oregon, and Intermountain Indian School in Utah.¹⁵

The ten states with the most boarding schools are Oklahoma (83), Arizona (51), Alaska (33), New Mexico (26), South Dakota (25), Montana (17), Minnesota (15), Washington (13), North Dakota (12), and Wisconsin (12). States with two to ten schools are California, Colorado, Iowa, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Nebraska, Nevada, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Utah, and Wyoming. One school each has been identified in Alabama, Mississippi, North Carolina, Ohio, and Virginia.¹⁶

Federal boarding school records

The Office of Indian Affairs (since 1947, the Bureau of Indian Affairs) began establishing nonreservation boarding schools in the 1880s.¹⁷ The largest group of boarding school records is in the National Archives and Records Administration's Record Group 75: Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Records.

A list of BIA schools by state provides the name of the research facility that has the school's records and the date range of records. Most schools in the list have a link to the entry for the school or its Indian agency in the National Archives Catalog.¹⁸ Click on the Role links in the entry to see the types of records available for the school. For example, Mount Edgecumbe Boarding School in Alaska has student case files, yearbooks, school census cards, administrative correspondence files, and closure files at the National Archives at Seattle. Click Search Within This Series, if shown, to see the index. Most school records are not digitized.

Navigating Record Group 75: BIA Schools

BIA Schools

Children from Indian Nations across the country attended schools operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). Students were often sent to schools by the Indian Agency which had jurisdiction over their tribe. Records about schools and the students who attended them may be found with the originating agency as well as in the materials created by the school. This listing contains information about schools operated by the BIA. Churches, local communities and even the tribes themselves also operated schools, which are not listed here. Please contact the corresponding National Archives facility for more information about the records related to your research.

Alaska

1941-1983	Mount Edgecombe Boarding School (National Archives at Seattle)
1956-1975	Wrangell Institute (National Archives at Seattle)
Arizona	
1968- 1989	Cottonwood Day School under the Chinle Subagency (National Archives Riverside)
1895- 1922	Navajo Training School under the Navajo Agency (National Archives at Ri
1891- 1990	Phoenix Indian School (National Archives at Riverside)

"Navigating Record Group 75: BIA Schools," Native American Heritage, National Archives.

To request information on individual students, contact the National Archives research facility that holds the school's records. Provide the person's date of birth and variant name spellings, with the names of parents or tribal affiliation if known. Contact information for the research facilities is shown in the description of records in the National Archives Catalog and on the National Archives "Visit Us" web page, https://www.archives.gov/locations.

Most BIA schools created student case files containing name, degree of Indian blood, tribal affiliation, names and tribal affiliations of the

16. "American Indian Boarding Schools by State."

^{13. &}quot;Carlisle Indian Industrial School Document Guide," Dickinson College (https://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/sites/all/files/docs-pages/DocumentGuide.pdf).

^{14.} These tribal names are the White colonialist names, not the names of the tribes for themselves.

^{15. &}quot;Indigenous Peoples of the United States School Records," *FamilySearch Research Wiki* (https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Indigenous_Peoples_ of_the_United_States_School_Records). All five schools and the Carlisle School have individual Research Wiki pages linked from this page, with information about their history and records.

^{17. &}quot;Student Case Files from Non-Reservation Boarding Schools," Native American Heritage, National Archives (https://www.archives.gov/research/native-americans/schools).

^{18. &}quot;Navigating Record Group 75: BIA Schools," Native American Heritage, *National Archives* (https://www.archives.gov/research/native-americans/ bia-guide/schools). The schools operated by churches, local communities, and tribes are not included in the list.

student's parents or guardians, home address, religious affiliation, and dates of attendance. The case files may include applications for enrollment, medical examination forms, attendance and grade reports, examples of student work, newspaper clippings, documents related to student employment, and correspondence.¹⁹ The administrative records of BIA schools can have school censuses, financial records, and publications.²⁰

Photographs do not generally appear in student case files but may be included in administrative records. Thousands of individual photographs pertaining to Indian schools are digitized in the National Archives Catalog, https://www.archives. gov/research/catalog.²¹ The BIA photographs finding aid, https://www.archives.gov/research/nativeamericans/bia/photos, contains eight hundred photos. Click Topics at the top and then choose Schools.

National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition

A key resource for Indian boarding schools is the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (NABS). Its website, https:// boardingschoolhealing.org, addresses education, advocacy, and healing. Keyword searches in the NABS Resource Database Center can be filtered by school name, date range, area of interest, category, and document type.²² The Center's sections include

- Digital Archive: historical documents, books, reports, letters, newspaper articles
- Research: academic articles, dissertations, studies, presentations
- Reference: bibliographies, finding aids
- In the Media: articles, interviews, blogs, videos, podcasts
- Histories and Stories: personal histories and tribal histories

NABS offers a comprehensive overview of the boarding school system in "Healing Voices Volume

19. "Student Case Files from Non-Reservation Boarding Schools."

21. "Administrative Records Related to American Indian Schools."

native-americans/schools/school-records-more).

center).

subjects/1779).

1: A Primer on American Indian and Alaska Native Boarding Schools in the U.S."

Records in university archives and historical societies

University archives near boarding schools often have collections of photographs, government documents, and information about students. For example, two universities in Michigan provide tribal information, resources, and lists online and in special collections.²³

A search of holdings in the South Dakota State Historical Society locates oral histories, boarding school collections, photo albums, and collections of papers from families living near the reservations.24

FamilySearch Research Wiki

20. "Administrative Records Related to American Indian Schools," Native American Heritage, National Archives (https://www.archives.gov/research/

22. "Resource Database Center," National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (https://boardingschoolhealing.org/resource-database-

23. The Clarke Historical Library of Central Michigan University, near the Mt. Pleasant Indian School, provides a bibliography: https://www.cmich. edu/library/clarke/ResearchResources/Native_American_Material/Bibliography_of_Clarke_Material/Pages/default.aspx. Michigan State University has

24. "Boarding School Students-Native Americans-South Dakota," South Dakota State Historical Society (https://sdarchives.lyrasistechnology.org/

Search filters, "Resource Database Center," National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition.

The FamilySearch Research Wiki (https://www.familysearch.org/ wiki) is a helpful resource for obtaining information about Indian boarding schools. Each state page has a link on the right side, under Cultural Groups, to an Indigenous People page. The states with Indian schools have links to individual Research Wiki pages. The school pages include information about history and availability of records. Some pages include Family History Library microfilm numbers.

FILTER BY AREA OF INTEREST

- Historical Context 209
- Personal Stories 89
- Intergenerational Impacts 82
- Healing Today 131

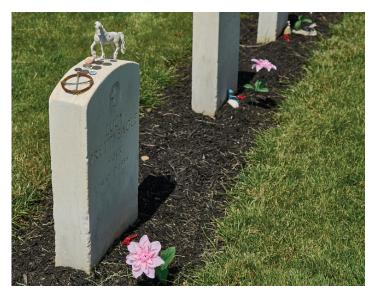
FILTER BY CATEGORY

Archives—Raw Historical Data
Research—Analytics and Interpretations
Educational Resources
Events/Meetings/Conferences
Journalism/News

FILTER BY DOCUMENT TYPE

	Articles/Whitepapers
	Books
	Videos/Podcasts/Webinars
	Website Resources
	PDFs
	Museums/Historical Landmarks
	Photos
	Lists and Finding Aids
	elect
S	elect V
	TER BY DATE RANGE

extensive information about tribes and resources: https://libguides.lib.msu.edu/c.php?g=95603&p=624366.



Grave markers at Carlisle Indian Cemetery in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where children who died at the Carlisle Industrial School are buried. Photographed in 2019 by Carol M. Highsmith. Library of Congress (https://www.loc.gov/item/2019690571/).

Recommended Resources

Books

- Adams, David Wallace. *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience: 1875–1928.* Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995.
- Burich, Keith R. *The Thomas Indian School and the "Irredeemable" Children of New York.* Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2016.
- Child, Brenda J. *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900–1940.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998.
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- Fortunate Eagle, Adam. *Pipestone: My Life in an Indian Boarding School.* Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012.
- Giago, Tim A. *Children Left Behind: The Dark Legacy of Indian Mission Boarding Schools.* Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light Publishing, 2006.
- Gram, John R. Education at the Edge of Empire: Negotiating Pueblo Identity in New Mexico's Indian Boarding Schools. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015.

- Lajimodiere, Denise. Stringing Rosaries: The History, the Unforgivable, and the Healing of Northern Plains American Indian Boarding School Survivors. Fargo, ND: North Dakota State University Press, 2021.
- Stout, Mary A. *Native American Boarding Schools*. Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2012.
- Trafzer, Clifford E., Jean A. Keller, Lorene Sisquoc. *Boarding School Blues: Revisiting American Indian Educational Experiences.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006.

Presentations and articles

- Blakemore, Erin. "A Century of Trauma at U.S. Boarding Schools for Native American Children." *National Geographic*, 9 July 2021. https://www. nationalgeographic.com/history/article/a-centuryof-trauma-at-boarding-schools-for-nativeamerican-children-in-the-united-states
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- Pember, Mary Annette. "Death by Civilization: The Traumatic Legacy of the Indian Boarding Schools." The Atlantic, 8 March 2019. https:// www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2019/03/ traumatic-legacy-indian-boarding-schools/584293