

Call for Papers: Church Roles in the History and Continuing Impacts of the Boarding School Policy of the 19th and 20th Century

Date: April 15, 2015

The policy makers of the United States government have consistently struggled with the independence or assimilation of the indigenous people of the Americas. The policies of the early European explorers and their masters, while aimed primarily at the acquisition of the land and natural resources of the indigenous people, nonetheless struggled with varying policies for the treatment of the people they dispossessed in the process. At the extremes were genocide at one end, and total assimilation and thus vanishing into what had become the majority culture on the other. The most vocal advocates for the assimilation were the Christian Churches, motivated in part by humanitarian concerns against genocide, and in part by their Christian mission to proselytize and save souls through conversion to Christianity.

In the spirit of atonement and healing, against the backdrop of the World Council of Churches movement to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery, the time is now right for the various Christian religious communities and churches to document and acknowledge their roles in the development and implementation of the boarding school policy in the United States. Such an investigation will serve, for each community and church that meets the challenge, a first and vital step towards healing the harms caused to indigenous people and communities by the boarding schools, as well as to rectify the relationship between those religious communities and churches and even the United States as a whole on one side, and native communities on the other.

The less violent goals of the religious communities and churches led them to advocate for the “civilization” of Native Americans through conversion that required renunciation of all things related to Native American culture and practices that were inconsistent with Christian teaching (e.g. plural marriage), and the pursuit of a hunter/gatherer lifestyle. These efforts have been recognized as acts of cultural genocide. The goal was “to Americanize the Indians, to destroy tribalism with its communal land base, and to substitute the individualism which marked white society.”¹ Several denominations played a prominent role in both development and implementation of the boarding school policy in the United States. The opportunity has now arisen to make right and come clean by honestly documenting and critically considering the extent of the roles each denomination played. It is in the interest of this movement towards healing from the past that the following call is made for research focused on further documentation and critical consideration of denominational involvement in the United States boarding school policy as an instrument of cultural genocide.

▣ ¹ [The Churches and the Indian Schools, 1888-1912](#), Prucha, Francis Paul, U of Neb Press 1979, Preface at ix.

Call for Papers

Research and information such as that outlined below will help inform a more complete understanding of the role of the various churches in the development and implementation of the Boarding School Policy. Following this call for research, and for purposes of setting the stage and context, an Introduction to the U.S. Boarding School Policy is provided. This call is for research that:

- Provides the historical documentation for the theological and philosophical ideas that drove the policy of cultural annihilation, and the establishment of the boarding schools as the vehicle to accomplish it.
- Traces the roots of Christian thinking behind the Civilization Act of 1819. Where is the rationale first expressed in Christian writings? Writings from your own particular church?
- How did church forefathers justify the eradication of Native cultures? Was this question debated in church meetings and literature? What were the theological underpinnings for cultural annihilation?
- Whether assimilation was recognized as cultural annihilation. What language did church forefathers use to talk about the Boarding Schools and other policies and programs to promote assimilation?
- To what extent did church forefathers intend and attempt to proselytize and convert Native people – adults and children? There are currently marked differences among different denominations and their subparts as to their commitment to proselytizing and converting. How did these differences impact perspectives in the 19th and 20th centuries with respect to Native peoples?
- What role did church forefathers play in the establishment of the Board of Indian Commissioners and President Grant's Peace Policy? What were the beliefs about the reasons for creating the Board and establishing the Peace Policy?
- What was the thought basis for advocating for and accepting appointments as Indian agents, Indian Boarding School administrators and teachers in the 1870s through 1934? Were there expressed goals in accepting these positions, and if so, what were they? Was there debate and recording around these concerns?
- While it is clear that Christian individuals participated in the formulation of the policies that led to the establishment of Indian Boarding Schools, and that church leaders accepted roles as administrators and teachers in the schools, it is equally important to understand the role each denomination played in collaborating with other denominations in establishing the Board of Indian Commissioners and the operation of various schools.
- What statistics can describe life at, and the impacts that were felt/borne by the students at, the boarding schools in indicators like health, budgets, death rates, tribal representation?

- What details can be discerned from descriptions of social and other life for students at the boarding schools, as reported by members in charge of or working at those schools?
- How did members working at or managing Indian Boarding Schools collaborate or resist the corruption within the BIA?

Interested parties may submit responsive papers to the attention of:

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For more information on the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition,

see: www.boardingschoolhealing.org or <https://www.facebook.com/NNABSHC>

Introduction to the U.S. Boarding School Policy

The goal of “civilization” of Native people was to transform them into “Americans” by reforming them into pale copies of what had become the majority culture. Reforming adults who were fully acculturated into Native ways and spiritual beliefs and practices was seen as too daunting. Transforming the children was a more promising goal.

The goal of transforming Native young people through assimilation is apparent in the earliest history of the colonies. The roots of attempted assimilation through education lie deep in the history of the Virginia Colony, sanctioned by the Anglican Church as early as 1619.² William and Mary College was founded to serve as an Indian school in the latter part of the same century.³ Dartmouth College’s earliest roots are in its Puritan founder’s desires to establish a school for local Native men.⁴

The Indian Boarding School policy itself has been a collaboration of the Christian churches and the federal government since its earliest inception, beginning with the Indian

² Kruszewski, Patty, “America’s First University—Almost”, Henrico Citizen, 5/27/2011, http://www.henricocitizen.com/index.php/news/article/americas_first_university_almost

³ <http://www.wm.edu/about/history/historiccampus/indianschool/index.php>

⁴ Childs, Francis Lane (December 1957). "[A Dartmouth History Lesson for Freshman](#)". *Dartmouth Alumni Magazine*

Civilization Act Fund of March 3, 1819. Thomas Lorraine McKenny served as the first Superintendent of Indian Trade starting in 1816 and was “one of the key figures in the development of American Indian policy.”⁵ It was McKenny that advocated the federal policy of education and civilization through a network of schools to be run by the missionary societies under the supervision of the Superintendent of Indian trade.⁶ Although Mr. McKenny was a Quaker, there is no indication that the church played a direct role in the development of his policies. He likely was the architect of the Civilization Act to “encourage activities of benevolent societies in providing schools for the Indians ... and authorized an annual ‘civilization fund’ to stimulate and promote this work.” The federal government paid churches to run Indian schools:

The goal of the rising Protestant missionary endeavors was to evangelize the world, to bring Christ’s message to all mankind. And the instrument for that great work was to be the United States committed to Christian principles. Deeply imbued with a sense of mission, of carrying out God’s commands of justice and compassion, active Christians reinforced the national policy of paternalism to the Indians. It was not enough to lament the past failings in regard to the Indians. A committee of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in 1824 condemned failures to improve the civil, moral and religious condition of the Indians, injustices in acquiring Indian lands and furs, and devastating wars against the natives. It viewed these acts as “national sins, aggravated by our knowledge and their ignorance, our strength and skill in war and their weakness; by our treacherous abuse of their simplicity, and especially by the light of privileges of Christianity, which we now enjoy, and of which they are destitute.” The only way to avert the just vengeance of God for these wrongs – and to “elevate our national character, and render it exemplary in the view of the world” – was to speed the work of civilizing and elevating the Indians.

The Great Father at 32-33 (quoting from the “Memorial of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions,” March 3, 1924, ASP:IA, 2: 446).

The thrust of “civilization” of Native Americans was to strip them of their traditions and customs and teach them the ways of the majority culture in missionary schools, i.e., transform them into Christian farmers or laborers.

- The churches were funded by the federal gov’t to accomplish this cultural genocide.
- The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) was created in 1824 within the Department of War primarily to administer the funds to the churches from the Civilization Fund.⁷

⁵The Great Father: The United States Government and the Indians, Prucha, Francis Paul, U of Neb Press, 1984 (“The Great Father”), V. 1 at 127.

⁶ Id. At 129.

⁷ The Bureau of Indian Affairs was established on March 11, 1824, by Secretary of War John Calhoun by administrative fiat.

- In 1824, the Indian Civilization Fund subsidized 32 schools that enrolled more than 900 Indian children. By 1830, the Indian Civilization Fund supported fifty-two schools with 1,512 enrolled students.⁸
- Funds from Indian treaties augmented the program, frequently without consultation with or consent of the Tribe signatory to the treaty.

During the 60 years between 1819 and 1879 most of the Church-run schools were on or near the reservations or homelands of the Native American children. The children would return home either daily or on weekends to be with their families and communities. In 1886 John B. Riley, Indian School Superintendent said that:

If it be admitted that education affords the true solution to the Indian problem, then it must be admitted that the boarding school is the very key to the situation. However excellent the day school may be, whatever the qualifications of the teacher, or however superior the facilities for instruction of the few short hours spent in the day school is, to a great extent, offset by the habits, scenes and surroundings at home — if a mere place to eat and live in can be called a home. **Only by complete isolation of the Indian child from his savage antecedents can he be satisfactorily educated. . . .**

Mere education was not enough. Separating children from their family, their tribe, their culture, and their homes on the reservation was necessary to larger goal of assimilating them into the majority culture.

The Struggle to “Civilize” the Native People

There was a serious debate about whether to exterminate the “wild” tribes that had not been confined to a reservation, or to seek their conversion to a “civilized” form of life – by which was meant to be Christian farmers or craftsmen. The military and the frontier settlers were the primary advocates of the former, and the churches the latter. It wasn’t a serious debate in the sense of impending strategy. While there were examples of barbaric slaughter of native people – e.g. Wounded Knee, Sand Creek, etc. – it was, in fact, simply too expensive to enter into an extended campaign of genocide. It was estimated that the annual cost to maintain a company of United States Cavalry in the field was \$2,000,000. Whatever the standards of humanity, the economics augured for assimilation as the preferred alternative.

Among the frontier settlers with largely squatter mentality was the occasional person of conscience that could see past their own self-interest in acquiring land and riches to the incredible injustices visited on the native people in the process of their dispossession. John Beeson, likely a Quaker, was one such person who lobbied tirelessly to expose the erroneous depiction of the Indians as the aggressors when it was the settlers who were in fact the transgressors against Indian lands and resources. In 1858 he argued that it was not civilization which was destroying the original inhabitants, "but the more highly

⁸ Andrew K. Frank, “Indian Civilization Fund” Act. Encyclopedia of American Indian History, 541 (Johansen and Pritzker, eds., 2008)

energized Savagism that creeps under its mantle, usurps its prerogative, and does unspeakable wrongs ... in its name."⁹ Beeson met several times with President Abraham Lincoln and pressed upon him the idea that Indians should receive instruction in every phase of the culture which was displacing their own: Anglo-American economy, democratic self-government, and the Christian religion.¹⁰

A contemporary of Beeson was Episcopal Bishop of Minnesota Henry B. Whipple who worked toward the same goal. In 1860 Whipple sent a letter to President Buchanan in which he lamented the evils of liquor and the failure and inability, and unwillingness, of the federal government to enforce the laws prohibiting its distribution among the Tribes. He also observed that the federal policy of treating the tribes as self-governing nations was mistaken; it would be better to regard Indians as wards and undertake their assimilation: Once the laws were enforced, practical Christian teachers could instruct them in agriculture and other arts of civilization. More important, he decried the corrupt patronage system of appointment of Indian agents that resulted in the looting of Indian resources, fraudulent contracts and sham schools that accomplished little more than to line the pockets of the Indian Agents. He sought a system that would allow for the appointment of "a commission of men of high character, who have no political ends to subserve," to which should be given the responsibility for devising a more perfect system for administering Indian affairs.¹¹

The Board of Indian Commissioners and the Peace Policy of 1869¹²

The Board of Indian Commissioners

The Boarding School Policy ("Policy") was initiated as part of President Grant's "Peace Policy" in 1869 and authorized the voluntary and coerced removal of Native American children from their families for placement in boarding schools run by the government and Christian churches. The stated goal of removal was to "civilize" the Indian by erasing Native identity and culture. This approach was thought to be less costly than wars against the Tribes or eradication of Native populations. The Boarding School Policy represented a shift from genocide of Indian people to a more defensible, but no less insidious, policy of cultural genocide; the systematic destruction of indigenous communities through the removal and reprogramming of their children.

Grant's Peace Policy

Grant's Peace Policy, adopted in 1869, was the adjunct anticipated by the creation of the Board of Indian Commissioners and was to fulfill two important goals:

⁹ Fritz, *The Movement for Indian Assimilation, 1860-1890*, pg 37.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.* at 43.

¹² In 1869 Congress adopted the Act of April 10, 1869, 16 Stat 13, 40 which provided that: "[The President] is hereby authorized . . . to organize a board of commissioners, to consist of not more than ten persons, to be selected by him from men eminent for their intelligence and philanthropy, to serve without pecuniary compensation, who may . . . exercise joint control with the Secretary of the Interior over the disbursement of appropriations made by this act. . ."

- 1) the replacement of corrupt government officials, called the “Indian Ring”,¹³ with religious men, nominated by churches to oversee the Indian agencies on reservations; and
- 2) To Christianize the native tribes and eradicate their culture and religion, primarily through removal of the children from reservation settings.

Grant’s appointments to the Board were male Protestants. Two Roman Catholics were appointed in 1902 by Theodore Roosevelt. Although a clear and obvious violation of the principle of separation of church and state, none of the leaders of the day believed the principle applied to Native Americans. The Catholics, having been initially excluded from the Board, argued fervently that the children should have the freedom to choose their religion, saying in one statement:

“The Indians have a right, under the Constitution, as much as any other person in the Republic, to the full enjoyment of liberty of conscience; accordingly they have the right to choose **whatever Christian belief they wish**, without interference from the Government.”¹⁴

The Assignment of the Reservations by Indian Souls

In 1872, the Board of Indian Commissioners allotted seventy-three Indian agencies to various denominations as follows:

- Methodists fourteen agencies in the Pacific Northwest (54,743 Indians),
- Orthodox Friends ten (17,724),
- Presbyterian nine in the Southwest (38,069),
- Episcopalians eight in the Dakotas (26,929),
- Catholics seven (17,856),
- Hicksite Friends six (6,598),
- Baptists five in Utah, Idaho and the Indian Territory (40,800),
- Reformed Dutch five (8,118),
- Congregationalists three (14,476),
- Christians two (8,287),
- Unitarians two (3,800),
- American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in the Indian territory of Oklahoma (1,496),
- Lutherans one (273).

¹³) The Indian Ring in Dakota Territory, 1870-1890, 345-368, George H. Phillips, South Dakota State Historical Society (1972).

¹⁴ The Churches and the Indian Schools, 1888-1912, Prucha, Francis Paul, U of Neb Press 1979