

Native Americans, Boarding Schools, and Cultural Genocide

SECTION ONE

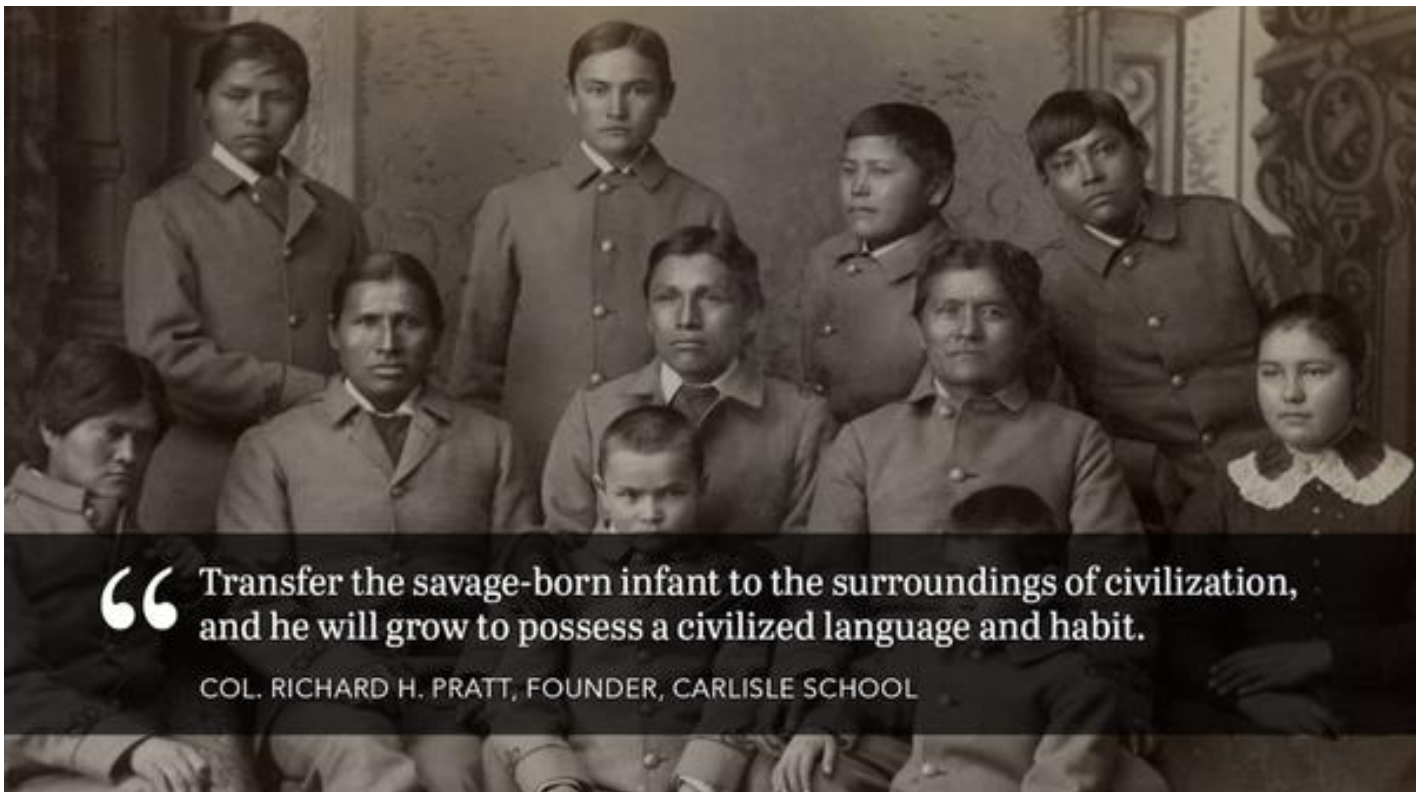
How Boarding Schools Tried to ‘Kill the Indian’ Through Assimilation

By [Becky Little](#)

SOURCE: <https://www.history.com/news/how-boarding-schools-tried-to-kill-the-indian-through-assimilation>

“Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.”

That was the mindset under which the U.S. government forced tens of thousands of [Native American](#) children to attend “assimilation” boarding schools in the late 19th century. Decades later, those words—delivered in a speech by U.S. cavalry captain Richard Henry Pratt, who



opened the first such school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania—have come to symbolize the brutality of the boarding school system.

The history of this forced assimilation is far from settled. On August 7, 2017, the U.S. Army began exhuming the graves of three children from the [Northern Arapaho](#) tribe who had died at Pratt's Carlisle Indian Industrial School in the 1880s. The children's names were Little Chief, Horse, and Little Plume—names they were forbidden to use at the school.

Students at Carlisle and the roughly 150 other such schools that the government opened were susceptible to deadly infections like tuberculosis and the flu. During Carlisle's operation between 1879 and 1918, nearly 200 other children were buried in the same cemetery as the Northern Arapaho boys, [according to The Washington Post](#).

Carlisle and other boarding schools were part of a long history of U.S. attempts to either kill, remove, or assimilate Native Americans. In 1830, the U.S. forced Native Americans to move west of the Mississippi to make room for U.S. expansion with the the [Indian Removal Act](#). But a few decades later, the U.S. worried it was running out of places to relocate the country's original inhabitants.

"As white population grew in the United States and people settled further west towards the Mississippi in the late 1800s, there was increasing pressure on the recently removed groups to



Yufna Soldier Wolf, center, of the Northern Arapaho, with tribal elders, Mark Soldier Wolf and Crawford White Sr., holds pictures of Little Plume, Horse and Little Chief. *The three Arapaho children* died about 135 years ago while attending a government-run school in Pennsylvania, the Carlisle Indian School, where they were buried.



give up some of their new land," [according to the Minnesota Historical Society](#). Since there was no more Western territory to push them towards, the U.S. decided to remove Native Americans by assimilating them. In 1885, Commissioner of Indian Affairs Hiram Price explained the logic: "[it is cheaper to give them education than to fight them.](#)"

The Carlisle Indian School

As part of this federal push for assimilation, boarding schools forbid Native American children from using their own languages and names, as well as from practicing their religion and culture. They were given new Anglo-American names, clothes, and haircuts, and told they must abandon their way of life because it was inferior to white people's.



Children from the Chiricahua Apache Tribe upon arrival at the Carlisle School

Though the schools left a devastating legacy, they failed to eradicate Native American cultures as they'd hoped. Later, the [Navajo Code Talkers](#) who helped the U.S. win World War II would reflect on the strange irony this forced assimilation had played in their lives.

"As adults, [the Code Talkers] found it puzzling that the same government that had tried to take away their languages in schools later gave them a critical role speaking their languages in military service," [recounts the National Museum of the American Indian](#).

In addition to the Northern Arapaho in Wyoming, the [Rosebud Sioux](#) of South Dakota and native people of Alaska are also seeking the return of children's remains from Carlisle, [reports Philly.com](#). Yet if the results of Northern Arapaho's search are any example, this may prove to be quite difficult.

On August 14, 2017, the Army sent the remains of Little Chief and Horse back to their relatives on the Wind River Reservation. The Northern Arapaho will bury them [on August 18, 2017](#). Little Plume, however, was not sent back because [he wasn't found](#). In what was supposed to be his

coffin, archaeologists instead discovered the bones of two others who couldn't have been Little Plume because their ages didn't match his.

Researchers aren't sure who those two people are or where Little Plume could be, and the Northern Arapaho haven't stated whether they'll continue to search for him. For now, the Army has reburied the two people found in his coffin, and Little Plume remains one of Carlisle's many missing children.



SECTION TWO

Government Boarding Schools Once Separated Native American Children from Families

By [Becky Little](#)

SOURCE: <https://www.history.com/news/government-boarding-schools-separated-native-american-children-families>

Once they returned home, Native American children struggled to relate to their families after being taught that it was wrong to speak their language or practice their religion.

In 1879, U.S. cavalry captain Richard Henry Pratt opened a boarding school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. But it wasn't the kind of boarding school that rich parents send their children to. Rather, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School was a government-backed institution that forcibly separated Native American children from their parents in order to, as Pratt put it, ["kill the Indian in him, and save the man."](#)

Over the next several decades, Carlisle served as a model for nearly 150 such schools that opened around the country. Like the 1887 [Dawes Act](#) that reallocated Native American land, or the Bureau of Indian Affairs' 1902 ["haircut order"](#) specifying that men with long hair couldn't receive rations, Native American boarding schools were a method of [forced assimilation](#). The end goal of these measures was to make Native people more like the white Anglo-Americans who had taken over their land.

At boarding schools, staff forced Indigenous students to cut their hair and use new, Anglo-American names. They forbid children from speaking their Native language and observing their religious and cultural practices. And by removing them from their homes, the schools disrupted students' relationships with their families and other members of their tribe. Once they returned home, children struggled to relate to their families after being taught that it was wrong to speak their language or practice their religion.

"Through breaking bonds to culture, they [broke] bonds to one another," says [Doug Kiel](#), a history professor at Northwestern University. "It's a way of destroying a community."

Some students never made it home at all. Boarding schools were susceptible to deadly infections like tuberculosis and the flu, and schools like Carlisle had cemeteries for dead students. Between Carlisle's founding 1879 and its closing 1918, the school buried nearly 200



children in its cemetery. In 2017, the [Northern Arapaho](#) tribe [successfully petitioned](#) the U.S. government to return the remains of two boys who died at Carlisle.

Students who did survive were marked by trauma. Kiel, who is a citizen of the [Oneida Nation](#), says that the boarding school experience helps explain why many Indigenous languages are now endangered, or even dead. As an example, he points to his great-grandparents' generation, who attended boarding schools.

"My grandmother recalled hearing the Oneida language being spoken around her by the people who were the adults, but they chose not to teach it to children," he says. "Why? Because it was a source of trauma for them. And they had been told that it was backwards, that it was uncivilized,

that it was of the past, that there was no utility in speaking it." Some thought that speaking it would only be a burden to their children.

The Carlisle Indian School

Boarding schools based on the Carlisle model fizzled out in the early 20th century. But after that, the rupture of Native American families continued in other ways. By the 1940s, "Native kids are simply being deemed to be in unfit households with unfit mothers," Kiel says.

"That's not official government policy," he continues. "But it's a racially-biased perception of Native families, of Native homes, of Native mothers that has the effect of forcibly removing Native children from their homes and placing them into, generally, the homes of white people in ways that serve to cut Native people off from their communities."

Congress passed the 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act based on research that "25–35 percent of all Native children were being removed; of these, 85 percent were placed outside of their families and communities—even when fit and willing relatives were available," [according to the National Indian Child Welfare Association's website](#). With the act, tribes won the ability to determine the residency of children in that tribe.

The Legacy of Canada's Residential Schools

Odds of **dying** for **children in Indian residential schools**:

1 in 25

Odds of **dying** for **Canadians serving in WWII**:

1 in 26

CBCnews

Library and Archives Canada

Native American boarding schools were also established in Canada with the same goals and the same brutal consequences.

The infographic features a background image of a classroom with Native American children. A vertical line separates the two statistics. The text is overlaid in white and blue on a dark background.

Racially-based separation of children from their parents is still a problem. The Department of Health and Human Services [acknowledged](#) in 2016 that black and Native children were [overrepresented](#) in the child welfare services. And though new laws like the 1990 [Native American Languages Act](#) have protected Indigenous children's right to learn their own language and history in [Bureau of Indian Education](#) schools, there are significant educational inequalities between Native and non-Native students.

In 2014, the high school graduation rate for Native students was [67 percent](#), the lowest among the racial and ethnic groups measured. The following year, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan went so far as to call the Bureau of Indian Education "[the epitome of broken.](#)"

SECTION THREE

Sexual Trauma: One Legacy of the Boarding School Era

By Ruth Hopkins

SOURCE: <https://lastrealindians.com/sexual-trauma-one-legacy-of-the-boarding-school-era-ruth-hopkins/>

Every American Indian alive today has been affected by the policy of assimilation implemented by the United States government in centuries past.

Under the guise of Manifest Destiny, European invaders swept through North America in ever increasing waves- displacing Natives from their ancestral homelands. They made treaties with Native nations only to break them, and resorted to outright theft when push came to shove. Ultimately, these greed-driven conquests led to the massacre of millions of innocent Indigenous peoples. Their weapons of mass destruction were disease, starvation, and war.

They underestimated the strength and resilience of North America's First Peoples. Despite their best efforts to terminate us, and even though Natives were vastly outnumbered, we persisted. The Oceti Sakowin (Great Sioux Nation), joined by allies, defeated U.S. forces on North American soil at the Battle of Little Big Horn. Even though they killed nearly all the buffalo, Natives held on. We survived. In the late 1800s, a new idea arose as to how to deal with the "Indian problem." The Powers that Be, backed by popular opinion, decided it was better to "kill the Indian and save the man." In other words, they desired to strip us our Tribal cultures and languages and make us

over in their image. They wanted to “civilize” Natives, and they would use religion and education to do it.

Pre-1900, 25 boarding schools were built off-reservation and at least 30,000 Native children, about 10% of the entire Native population at the time, were pushed through the system. These boarding schools were run by religious organizations, and funded by the Federal government. By the end of the boarding school era, over 100,000 Native children had passed through the boarding school system.

Many Native children were snatched from their mother’s arms and stolen away to attend boarding schools. My grandmother Stella Pretty Sounding Flute was forced to go to boarding school, as were her brothers. She described the intense trauma children experienced when they were taken away from everything and everyone they know and placed in a strange, cold, impersonal environment cut off from nature. One of the first events upon arrival to the boarding school laid the groundwork for the years of psychological damage that would be inflicted on the children for years to come. Their hair would be cut. Traditionally, Native men wore long hair. Stella recalled seeing boys’ spirits broken as their braids, literal ties to their Tribal identity and holding spiritual power, fell to the floor.

Children were forbidden to speak their Native tongue, and beaten for doing so. The implementation of this English-only policy at boarding schools is the primary reason so many Native languages are on the brink of extinction now. My father, also a boarding school survivor, told stories of his willful older brother, who would not stop speaking the Dakota language despite the abuse he received for refusing to give it up. Years later, that same brother went onto teach Dakota language to children at a Tribal high school.

Life at boarding school was punishing of its own accord. Children were not allowed to return home to visit their families for years at a time, if at all. Conditions were harsh. During particularly cold winters, some children froze to death in their beds. Days were long, and usually consisted of difficult, and occasionally dangerous, industrial work.

Despite all of these horrors, none of them compares to the shocking level of inhumane physical brutality, sexual abuse and child rape that took place at boarding schools. Child molestation was rampant.

Brave elders have come forward to share their heart wrenching tales of abuse and assault at the hands of priests, nuns, and other staff at boarding schools. As a parent, it’s difficult to listen to stories of how innocent preschool age girls were digitally penetrated by perverted priests and little boys were forced to perform oral sex on nuns in the middle of the night under pain of death. Sexual abuse was frequent and continuous, utter torture. Most of us will never know the trauma our grandmothers and grandfathers were made to endure at boarding schools.



There are thousands of Native children in both the United States and Canada who never returned home from boarding and residential schools; their small, bruised, and broken bodies yet unaccounted for. There are even reports of children who were murdered while still newborns, that their families never knew existed. These babies, who died without names, were the product of rape, when priests assaulted girls and impregnated them. The souls of these murdered children cry out for justice.

Coupled with justice, we also need healing. Sexual abuse is a disease. Even today, when Native survivors of sexual trauma come forward, the abuse can nearly always be traced back through a line victims who became perpetrators, with the first act of sexual violence originating at a boarding school.

Boarding school has also affected Native communities' natural healing process, because it robbed us of not only our close familial bonds, but our cultural belief systems, as well as ceremonies meant to doctor us and cleanse us.

Shame is a wall that hides sexual trauma. It prevents sexual abuse survivors from speaking help. We cannot afford to be quiet any longer. If you've been the victim of sexual abuse or rape, you are not alone. You can find healing, and you can reach out and help others like yourself too.

Despite the devastation the Federal government's policy of assimilation and the boarding school system has caused, all is not lost. We still have our Native languages, our cultures, and our belief

systems. Combined with new counseling techniques, we can heal ourselves and our communities.

Sexual trauma remains largely unaddressed, even though it is a root cause for much of what ails Native communities today. It contributes to mental health issues, suicide epidemics, and family dysfunction. Together, we will end this plague.

NOTE: Some images are not in the original.