

STORY

Carlisle and the Indian Boarding School Legacy in America

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Tlingit elder Bob Sam says a prayer at the gravesite of a Native Alaskan child who died while attending the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania. Last month marked the 100th anniversary of the closing of Carlisle, which was the first government off-reservation Indian boarding school in the United States—it would become the model for future boarding schools throughout the U.S. and Canada. Roughly 12,000 Native children attended, many of whom were taken from their families and communities by force in the name of coercive assimilation. This cemetery near where the school once stood is home to the graves of 184 students. Mr. Sam has spent the past 30 years working to help identify and repatriate the remains of children who died while at boarding schools across the country. He came to Carlisle in early October for a gathering hosted by the Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, which

brought together Native boarding school survivors, activists, and many community leaders who, like Mr. Sam, are working to bring the children buried at Carlisle back to their homelands. Image by Daniella Zalzman. United States, 2018.



Carlisle was the beginning.

Founded in 1879 by U.S. Army General Richard Pratt, the first government-funded off-reservation boarding school for Native American children was created to assimilate Indigenous Americans into the dominant white culture. Students were forced to abandon their language and cultural traditions, cut their hair, and adopt western clothing and names.

Decades later, these practices would be labeled cultural genocide.

While it was only open for 39 years, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School became the model on which future Indian Boarding Schools in the United States and Indian Residential Schools in Canada were based, laying the foundation for more than a century of institutions that worked to forcibly erase Indigenous culture by targeting the most vulnerable members of any community: its children.

Last month, almost exactly a hundred years after Carlisle was closed for good, the [National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition \(NABS\)](#) held their [first national conference](#) in just a few miles from the former school grounds. I was honored to attend to share my work and learn from all of the boarding school survivors, activists,

educators, and researchers who convened to share stories and resources and discuss collective efforts to move towards truth, justice, and healing.

When I first began interviewing residential school survivors in Canada in 2014, I remember casually asking the non-Indigenous Canadians I encountered in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and Ontario if they knew much about residential schools. Almost none of the people I spoke with knew anything about the history, or even that the schools existed at all.

But in 2015, Canada released the findings of a seven year long Truth and Reconciliation Commission, along with a [list of calls to action](#) to serve as guidelines for moving forward. They touched on everything from updating educational curricula to improving healthcare for Indigenous people to examining the ongoing treatment of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit children in the foster care system. Some of the goals were small, and immediately achievable (like updating Canada's oath of citizenship to acknowledge existing treaties with Indigenous peoples), others are structural changes that will take years of dedicated work.

It's important to note that most of those calls to action have still not been addressed—a Canadian historian named Ian Mosby monitors progress and just a couple weeks ago [released his latest findings](#) showing that only 8 of the 94 recommendations have been completed. But even so, just a few short years later, I felt a dramatic shift in public awareness. When I returned to Canada in August of 2015 to conduct the interviews that would constitute the first chapter of *Signs of Your Identity*, residential school history was already becoming part of mainstream Canadian conversation. Another couple years later, not only did it feel like it had become part of the collective consciousness, but teenagers I spoke with in schools in Saskatchewan and Ontario had a complex

understanding of concepts like intergenerational trauma, settler colonization, and cultural genocide.

In America, it's a different story. Whenever I speak to non-Native students, maybe one in twenty has a vague idea of what Indian Boarding Schools are. We still have no idea how many Native children went through the system in the United States. NABS is one of the only organizations compiling hard data on U.S. boarding school history—according to the information they've gathered, by the year 1926, nearly 83% of Native school-age children were attending boarding schools. Over 350 boarding schools were operating throughout the country. In 1900, there were 20,000 children enrolled, by 1925, the figure was 60,889.

There is power in numbers, and there is power in acknowledgement—and those are two things that the U.S. is sorely lacking when it comes to this particular chapter of our own history. When I speak about my work from Canada, it is easy for me to list off the facts and figures that underpin a hundred years of cultural oppression: 150,000 First Nations, Metis, and Inuit children attended Canadian Residential Schools. Roughly 80,000 of them are still alive today. An estimated 6,000 students died while at school (though that number is almost certainly too low). There are no equivalent figures for the American schools to help us wrap our heads around the magnitude of this story.

And most importantly: most Americans don't even know it happened. When we discuss commemoration of the Holocaust, or the September 11 attacks, we repeat the mantra "Never Forget." The act of remembering acknowledges that past and present trauma is real, and in the best possible version of reality prevents us from repeating our past mistakes.

But we have forgotten the boarding school history, if ever we knew it, and the same patterns of cultural genocide and separation continue to persist. [More Indigenous children in Canada are currently in the foster care system than ever attended residential schools.](#) In the United States, [a Federal judge in Texas just struck down the Indian Child Welfare Act](#) that's meant to keep Native children with their families. [Indigenous women are still being coerced into sterilization](#) across North America.

November is Native American Heritage Month. While we should remember and learn about the history of this land year-round, it is a particularly good time to make sure that our popular awareness of Native history extends beyond sanitized versions of the Thanksgiving story and the other misrepresentations that have managed to become our first cultural associations with Native identity. Carlisle, and boarding school history in general, is a story that we are obligated to share, and to remember.