



US ARMY PHOTO

Between 1879 and 1918, more than 7,800 American Indian and Alaska Native children attended the Carlisle Indian Boarding School in Carlisle, PA. The purpose of the school was to forcibly assimilate these youth to abandon their Native cultures and adopt Euro-American values and culture. Today, the Carlisle Barracks is an active Army installation which includes the historic landscape and structures of the former Carlisle Indian Industrial School. It remains a place to reflect on past assimilation policies and honor the memories of the children and Tribes harmed by them.

Setting the Stage

For thousands of years prior to the arrival of Europeans in North America, Indigenous people had, and continue to have, their own education systems, passing down their cultural traditions and languages from generation to generation. In the 16th and 17th centuries, European colonists sought trade and alliances with Tribes, but rapid colonial

expansion resulted in open conflicts over land and resources. When the United States was established at the end of the 18th century, the new government sought to “civilize” American Indians even as westward expansion displaced them and led to ongoing warfare between the United States and Tribes.

Carlisle Indian Boarding School

Relocation By the early 19th century, relocation of American Indians was an established policy of the federal government. Surviving American Indian nations fought to maintain their right to self-govern, keep their ancestral lands, and sustain their cultures. Ultimately the United States government forced survivors of the so-called Indian Wars to move to reservations. Many died during these relocations through exhaustion, starvation, and exposure to European diseases.

Even without land or political power, American Indians were able to pass on their cultures to their children. However, by the late 1870s, Congress began funding an off-reservation boarding school system managed by the Department of Interior and the War Department.

Carlisle The first of thousands of young Native American and Alaska Native children to attend the Carlisle Indian Industrial School arrived in October 1879. Generally considered the first Federal Indian boarding school, the Carlisle school was founded by U.S. military officer Richard Henry Pratt. He went into education after leading troops to fight American Indian nations during the Indian Wars and is famous for his boarding school philosophy: “Kill the Indian, Save the Man.” Pratt believed American Indian children could become successful American citizens if they abandoned their heritage. He wanted to change what made them different from Americans descended from Europeans, including their clothing, language, and beliefs. After opening the school at Carlisle, Pratt and his supporters forced young people to attend the school for three to five years. However, some chose to stay as long as 10 years.

Life at Carlisle

Carlisle Barracks was in good condition when the school opened. Children lived on the north end of the campus. Teachers, staff, and the superintendent lived on the southern side near the entrance. A large green space or quadrangle separated the grounds from the north and the south. Students and teachers

moved across the center of campus while using crisscrossing through-footpaths, a bandstand, and a stone guardhouse.

In the early 1880s, the American Indian students and the white staff expanded the school campus. They built a chapel, three-story

dining hall, classroom building, girls' dormitory, warehouse, boiler house, laundry, hospital, printing shop, an art studio, and a cemetery. They also added a six-foot fence around the perimeter of the campus.

Civilian school officials enforced military-style discipline at Carlisle. Children marched across the grounds to and from their classes, the dining hall, extra-curricular activities, and for regular inspections. They marched in groups like soldiers in military drills. When officials rang a bell, they shifted to new movements. If a student disobeyed a rule, they went to the guardhouse for punishment or were sentenced to hard labor.

School officials tried to make the Native American children look and dress like white Americans. Carlisle staff cut off the long braids of male children, took away the children's personal or tribal clothing, moccasins, and family belongings. Students could not keep medicine bags, jewelry, or ceremonial rattles. These items often had special meanings to Tribes. While at Carlisle, boys wore uniforms from morning until night and girls wore long, confining Victorian dresses. The school administrators also assigned a new English name to each child and did not allow Native languages to be spoken. Administrators took "before and after" photos of students. These photos showed children in the style of their home cultures "before" and in the style of Anglo Americans "after." People

who supported assimilation used the photos as propaganda to show politicians and the American public that cultural assimilation was working.

Pratt and his teachers taught American school subjects as well as hands-on training. Their goal was to prepare the students to work jobs outside of the reservation. Students studied English, math, geography, and music. Boys learned industrial skills. They were taught to build furniture and work with wood, iron, steel, tin, and other materials. Girls learned home skills. They learned to cook, do laundry, bake, and perform other caretaking skills. Students also participated in an "outing" system where they lived and worked with white American families in eastern Pennsylvania. They had to speak English and hold jobs to earn money while they were away from school.

Students at Carlisle were in sports teams, debate clubs, and marching bands. The school teams competed against prominent non-Native schools and in regional championships. One of the greatest athletes of the 20th century attended Carlisle: Jim Thorpe of the Sac and Fox Nation. Thorpe won athletic competitions as a Carlisle student, won two gold medals in the 1912 Summer Olympics, and went on to be a professional football player. The Carlisle band was famous, too. It performed at presidential inaugurations while the school was open.

Legacy

During the 1930s, federal education policy became more accepting of Indigenous cultures and languages. In 1934, the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act gave Tribes more autonomy on how and where their children were taught.

By the 1960s, American Indian nations became more involved in providing a formal, European-style education for Indigenous youth. Tribal representatives served as commissioners of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. In the 2010s, three off-reservation boarding schools continue to be operated with the mission of reviving Indigenous traditions and

instilling pride in their students.

The legacy of Carlisle and other Indian boarding schools represents a painful chapter in American history. An estimated 200 students died at Carlisle and were buried in a small cemetery on the school grounds. In recent years, the Army has coordinated with federally recognized Tribes to return children interred in the Carlisle Barracks Post Cemetery to their families and Tribes. Thousands of other children and their families experienced abuse and trauma as a result of their time at Carlisle and other government-run boarding schools.



Tom Torlino, Navajo student at Carlisle Indian Boarding School, in 1882 [L] and 1885 [R], Dickinson College Archives and Special Collections