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Native Sun News: Death rate cover-up at Carlisle Indian School

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Student body assembled on the Carlisle Indian School Grounds. Courtesy [Carlisle-www.army.mil](#)

Death rate cover-up at Carlisle Indian School

Children's deaths deliberately white washed by school's founders

By Brandon Ecoffey

Native Sun News Managing Editor

CARLISLE, Pa. — The research of Preston McBride, a recent graduate of Dartmouth's MALS graduate program, sheds new light on the history of the Carlisle Indian school and the place in history of the school's founder Capt. Richard Henry Pratt.

likely to die than a soldier going in to war," said McBride.

Founded in 1879, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School was the first off reservation boarding school and would be the school upon which the majority of other Government or church run boarding schools would model themselves after. The system of assimilating Indian children in such a manner was the brain child of Capt. Richard Henry Pratt. For most Americans the legacy of the Carlisle Indian School is one of mixed reaction. For some it is seen as a necessary tool of progress where Native American children were taught the ways of western civilization and where Pop Warner invented the forward pass that has led the way for today's high powered offenses in the NFL and where American hero Jim Thorpe developed his extraordinary athletic ability.

For others however, especially Native Americans, Carlisle stands as a reminder of the federal government's policy of forced assimilation and a dark chapter in the history of white and Native relations.

McBride's, who is of Comanche and Italian descent, findings may show that the true history of the school may be more in line with the latter. According to his recent master's thesis not only was the school a dangerous place where Indian children lived under the constant danger of death but a place where administrators at the school and the federal government took steps to hide these facts from history.

"The story of Carlisle is incredibly complex. You have some students who prospered in the school. Luther Standing Bear was one that would go on to write about his experiences. Howard Gansworth a Tuscarora Seneca went on to graduate from Princeton. There were doctors and lawyers that came out of Carlisle but they were the vast minority. Most if not all students contracted some form of debilitating or deadly disease and often students ran away due to fear of death because they were homesick and did not want to die... The conditions there were really awful and that is the part that gets whitewashed," he said.

McBride who is considered to be the foremost expert on the death rates of students at Carlisle asserts that Pratt and the government attempted to hide the conditions at the school for multiple reasons.

"In some regard people involved openly knew that they were doing something wrong. You can't stand by and see the deaths of hundreds of children as a positive in anyway. The whitewashing can be seen as a way to shed blame and to make themselves look good. Pratt's big thing was "look at what I'm doing at Carlisle we should take this system and expand it to the rest of the United States."

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they were far worse than most people realize. It was a forced labor camp, said McBride. Epidemics consistently swept through the school; epidemics would compound on top of one another," he added.

The children at the school were both underfed and undernourished. The diet at the school consisted of bread, water, and occasionally coffee despite the presence of a farm that produced both fruits and vegetables.

After extensively researching the "Death Files" at the National Archives in Washington DC that contain notecards on those students who died at the school, McBride found that Pratt along with other school officials were deliberately disguising the rates of death amongst the students by sending those they knew would die away from the school.

"The most telling whitewashing of the history is shown when children were terminally ill they were often sent home to die," he said. For McBride he feels that this type of quantifiable research in to boarding schools is lacking.

"Most of the boarding school literature is dominated by narratives of experiences which is equally important but you can't really get the full picture just from experiences"

Previous estimates had surmised that the total number of deaths at the school was somewhere near 230 students, McBride however has recalculated the number to be somewhere closer to 500 students who had died while under the direct supervision of the school or who had recently been sent home from Carlisle.

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