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At Carlisle Indian school cemetery, a battle over a lost Alaskan child

Updated: SEPTEMBER 6, 2016 — 12:10 PM EDT



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src=http%3A%2F%2Fmedia.philly.com%2Fimages%2F250*250%2FRS_phillyThumb2_1200x800_201C_318584691.jpg&verification=http%3A%2F%2Fmedia.philly.com%2Fimages%2FRS_phillyThumb2_1: C_318584691.jpg&source=006&title=090616_carlisle_1200&caption=Eleanor Hadden, left, hugs Barb Landis, historian with the Cumberland County Historical Society, following a ceremony at the Indian Cemetery at the Carlisle Barrack. This was during the Pow wow in 2000. There were 14 native Alaskans buried in the cemetery including Eleanor's great Aunt, Mary Kininnook.)

CHARLES FOX / FILE PHOTOGRAPH

Alaska anthropologist Eleanor Hadden (left) and Cumberland County historian Barb Landis embrace following a ceremony at the Indian Cemetery at the the Army War College in Carlisle, Pa. There are 14 native Alaskans buried in the cemetery including Hadden's great aunt, Mary Kininnook.

by **Jeff Gammage**, STAFF WRITER

CARLISLE, Pa. - Mary Kininnook died three days after her 14th birthday, weak and struggling to breathe, in a hospital bed at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School.



SLIDESHOW

[At Carlisle Indian school cemetery, a battle over a lost Alaskan child](http://www.philly.com/philly/news/20160907_At_Carlisle_Indian_school_cemetery_a_battle_over_a_lost_Alaskan_child)
[viewGallery=y](http://www.philly.com/philly/news/20160907_At_Carlisle_Indian_school_cemetery_a_battle_over_a_lost_Alaskan_child.html?photo_2)

But precisely where her body lies, no one knows.

Twice family members traveled here from Alaska, searching the school cemetery and checking the name on every headstone, only to learn she was likely buried in one of the graves marked "unknown."

"I had to call my mom - 'Mom, we can't find her. Nobody knows where she is,' " said Eleanor Hadden, an Alaska anthropologist and Kininnook's great niece. "My mom's crying. I'm crying. We were crying with the pain they must have felt when they learned she had died."

Now tribal elders in Alaska say they want to find, identify, and return Kininnook's remains to her ancestral home - portending conflict with the U.S. Army - as part of the latest and largest demand in a Native American movement for repatriation.

Alaskan leaders seek to have 14 children returned, including Henry Rose, also presumed buried as an unknown.

"We can almost positively identify Mary Kininnook [as an unknown]," said Bob Sam, a Sitka tribal councilman and repatriation leader. "We're going to make her case a priority."

Army officials who control the cemetery, set on the grounds of what is now the Army War College, have pledged to return remains to Indian tribes but say they will not disturb the 13 graves marked unknown.

Asked if that decision might be revisited - and perhaps DNA samples taken to aid families who search now or in the future - spokesman Dave Foster said that "until the U.S. Army meets with representatives of the tribes and villages we cannot provide a definitive answer."

Generally, he said, the Army will work with all tribes "toward a successful resolution, allowing families the ability to determine a final resting place for these young men and women."

Army and Indian representatives may meet next month in Fairbanks.

The cemetery contains the graves of nearly 200 native children who died at the school in a turn-of-the-century experiment in forced assimilation, a cultural genocide that continues to torment tribes and families.

The Alaskan effort opens a door on a little-known aspect of the school, which from 1879 to 1918 claimed more than 10,000 children from across the West, South, and Northeast - but also from the frozen North.

In the 1880s, Alaska saw a gold rush on souls, as Christian missionaries converted native peoples and helped send about 130 children to Carlisle.

The Alaskans traveled the farthest, sailing 700 miles to Seattle or another Pacific port, then going 2,700 miles by train to Carlisle, the nation's first federally funded, off-reservation boarding school.

Children as young as 4 were systematically stripped of their names, languages, religions, and traditions, taught that the ways of their people were savage and wrong.

Those who died were buried near the athletic fields. But over time wooden markers rotted, and in 1927 the cemetery was relocated in a muddled excavation.

One boy appears to have been named on two separate headstones. Others were named on none.

Today the only stone to mark the short life of Mary Kininnook stands 3,300 miles away, in Saxman, Alaska, a white spire of remembrance erected by a father and mother who had no body to bury.

'People of the tides'

The Tlingits - the "people of the tides" - have lived for eons on the broken chain of islands that make up the southern Alaska panhandle.

Mary Kininnook was born there, on Tongass Island, Christmas Day, 1894. By then the events that would deliver her to Carlisle were already in motion.

Former cavalry officer Richard Henry Pratt established the school with help from Christian reformers and a federal government eager to "civilize" Indians - a more humane, less expensive option than killing them outright.

Pratt encouraged and coerced tribal leaders to send their children east, promising to teach them the ways of the white man. His motto, "Kill the Indian, Save the Man," became the call for dozens of similar schools built across the United States and Canada.

The head of the Presbyterian Mission in Alaska was the Rev. Sheldon Jackson, an explorer credited with helping to introduce the reindeer to the territory. As the U.S. agent in charge of Alaska education, he worked to suppress native languages and religions, insisting that classes be taught in English and "pervaded by the spirit of the Bible."

His ties to Carlisle ran deep.

His wife was the sister of Rev. George Norcross, pastor of the borough's Second Presbyterian Church - Pratt's religious home. The three men shared similar goals for the Indians, as did a Jackson protégé, Rev. Edward Marsden, the missionary assigned to Saxman.

The first two Alaskan children arrived at Carlisle in 1888, according to school newspapers. More soon followed. At times, Jackson and Marsden personally escorted children to the school gates.

In Saxman, Marsden grew close to William and Lucy Kininnook, who would later name a son after him. The couple wed in the church on Jan. 15, 1903, and three days later saw the baptism of their two children, 8-year-old Mary and 12-year-old Paul, church records show.

Nine months later, both children arrived at Carlisle.

Mary was soon enrolled in the "outing" program, which lent students to local families who ran farms and businesses, furthering their assimilation and providing free summer labor.

Kininnook was "the smallest girl out in the country," the school newspaper noted in June 1904. No photo of her has been found. Her signature, in a neat schoolgirl's hand, survives on a contract for the term of 1907.

A medical report describes her illness:

Five weeks she lay in a hospital bed, fevered and emaciated. When doctors listened to her chest, they heard a crackling sound. They made no diagnosis, but noted that if Kininnook so much as coughed, it became nearly impossible for her to breathe.

She died at Carlisle on Dec. 28, 1908.

'Sister Mary died at Carlisle'

Elizabeth Kininnook Baines was only 3 when Mary left home, so she didn't remember a lot about her older sister. She never forgot her, either.

As she grew old, Baines talked to her family about the child buried at the Indian school, saying in resignation, "Sister Mary died at Carlisle."

After Baines died at 90 in 1991, her daughter, Mary Jones, found letters that her mother had written to government agencies. Jones picked up the search, but could learn little that was new.

"It was like she disappeared," said Jones, 85.

A man in Saxman heard about the family's efforts and phoned to explain an unusual discovery: He was clearing brush from his yard when his shovel hit something hard.

At first he thought it was a headstone. It wasn't. It was a cenotaph, the type of memorial erected for those who die far from home, whose bodies are not returned. Often Irish families place them for fishermen sons and fathers lost at sea.

This one, it turned out, had been made for Mary Kininnook by her parents.

During a 2009 ceremony in Saxman, family and friends gathered as the stone was relocated to Totem Park, where it now stands among the carved wooden poles.

Sam and others in Alaska want a monument installed at the Carlisle cemetery to honor the dead - named and unnamed. He said he believes Army officials want to do right, and will opt to allow attempts to identify the unknowns.

Determining the names of those students was long thought impossible.

But through years of analysis, Cumberland County historian Barbara Landis figured out the likely identities of seven students. This summer, Dickinson College researchers identified two more.

That's nine of 13.

Hadden, 64, who is Jones' daughter, said she would willingly provide a DNA sample to help identify her great aunt.

She despairs that Kininnook is buried as an unknown - because she wasn't unknown. She had a family who loved her. And descendants who mourn her now. She has people who still search for answers about her life, death, and burial.

"It's so very raw," Hadden said. "They can't find children? How could you lose children?"

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Published: September 6, 2016 — 1:17 PM EDT **The Philadelphia Inquirer**

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