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Quaker Indian Boarding Schools

Paula Palmer October 1, 2016

Facing Our History and Ourselves



Quaker teachers, families, and students at the Ottawa School, Indian Territory, 1872. Courtesy of the Quaker Collection at Haverford College.

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Last year I responded to a call that came from two sources: from Spirit, in the manner of Friends experiencing leadings, and from a coalition of Native American organizations that is working to bring about healing for Native people who still carry wounds from the Indian boarding schools.

My leading started with a nudge four years ago and grew into a ministry called Toward Right Relationship with Native Peoples. This ministry has grown in depth and breadth under the loving care of the Boulder (Colo.) Meeting. Working in partnership with Native American educators, I learned about their efforts to bring healing to the Native people, families, and communities that continue to suffer illness, despair, suicide, violence, and many forms of dysfunction that they trace to the Indian boarding school experience.

More than 100,000 Native children suffered the direct consequences of the federal government's policy of forced assimilation by means of Indian boarding schools during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Their bereft parents, grandparents, siblings, and entire communities also suffered. As adults, when the former boarding school students had children, their children suffered, too. Now, through painful testimony and scientific research, we know how trauma can be passed from generation to generation. The multigenerational trauma of the boarding school experience is an open wound in Native communities today.

The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition says that for healing to occur, the full truth about the boarding schools and the policy of forced assimilation must come to light in our country, as it has in Canada. The first step in a truth, reconciliation, and healing process, they say, is truth telling. A significant piece of the truth about the boarding schools is held by the Christian churches that collaborated with the federal government's policy of forced assimilation. Quakers were among the strongest promoters of this policy and managed over 30 schools for Indian children, most of them boarding schools, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The coalition is urging the churches to research our roles during the boarding school era, contribute this research to the truth and reconciliation process, and ask ourselves what this history means to us today.

Hearing this call, I began researching the Quaker Indian boarding schools, with support from Pendle Hill (the Cadbury scholarship), Swarthmore College (the Moore Fellowship), three yearly meetings, the Native American Rights Fund, the Louisville Institute, and my own meeting. In August 2015, I visited the sites of 11 of the Quaker Indian boarding schools in Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa, and then spent 16 weeks reading primary source materials in the Quaker history collections at Swarthmore and Haverford colleges.

I'd like Friends to learn about the Quaker Indian boarding schools as much as possible through the words of the Quaker teachers themselves and the Native students and other Native people who wrote about their experiences. These quotations are, of course, selective, but I believe they are fairly representative of views held by Friends and Native people during the boarding school era.





Friends' purpose in providing schools for Native children

In 1791, the Seneca chief Cornplanter wrote to Philadelphia Quakers:

Brothers...we cannot teach our children what we perceive their situation requires them to know, and we therefore ask you to instruct some of them. We wish them to be instructed to read and to write and such other things as you teach your own children, and especially teach them to love peace.

“

In a July 1869 letter to the Quaker Indian agent on the Otoe Reservation in Nebraska, Friend Edward Shaw from Richmond, Indiana, wrote:

to protect, to Civilize, and to Christianize our Red Brethren—it is a duty we owe them that we may help in a degree to make up to them for the cruelty and wrongs they have received at the hands of the white man, if that can ever be done. If we want them to become Christians, we must act as Christians towards them.

“

Why Friends promoted the “manual labor boarding schools,” or “industrial schools,” as opposed to day schools for Native children

In 1870, a delegation from Ohio and Genesee Yearly Meetings met with the Quaker men who were serving as Indian agents under President Ulysses S. Grant. They reported:

It is the opinion of all the agents that the Industrial School is the best adapted to the wants of the Indians. They will then be removed from the contaminating influences of the home circle, where they lose at night the good impressions they have received during the day.

“

In a letter dated May 26, 1853, teacher Susan Wood at the Quaker Tunesassa Indian Boarding School in New York, wrote:

We are satisfied it is best to take the children when small, and then if kept several years, they would scarcely, I think, return to the indolent and untidy ways of their people.

“

Why Quakers in the late 1800s felt it was so urgent for Indian children to be in school

In 1894, Quaker teacher Elizabeth Test wrote impassioned letters imploring the means to compel Kickapoo parents to send their children to school, even against their will:

“ I know it will sadly grieve [Kickapoo parents] to part with their children, but...every day's delay is of great loss to them.... There is not one of their whole number who can speak English..... In this condition they are already surrounded by whites, are being defrauded of the little money they have, are tempted continually with strong drink [and are] not disciplined to resist temptation. [They] often yield, and many who are not guilty are arrested and carried off to jail. Their ignorance renders them helpless.

Why Quakers, unlike some of the other denominations, did not proselytize among the Native peoples

In his 1875 book, *Life and Adventures of a Quaker Among the Indians*, Thomas Battey, a teacher to the Caddoes and Kiowas in Indian Territory, wrote:

“ It has long been my opinion, that to present the sublime doctrines of the gospel to these untutored people, without a preliminary work of preparation having been first accomplished, might be comparable to casting “pearls before swine,” or sowing good seed on the “stony ground”: it would not be likely to be productive of the best results.

In its October 12, 1867 issue, the *Friends Intelligencer* opined:

“ What is the white man's duty when he comes into contact with these sons of the forest? ... We must come as superiors and as Teachers. Our superiority must be shown by our conduct ... namely absolute justice, intelligent consideration and disinterested benevolence.... The doctrines of Religion and the teachings of Education will then have a basis to act upon.

What a child's first day at a Quaker Indian boarding school was like

In 1903, looking back on his stint as a teacher at the Quaker Shawnee Mission Boarding School in Kansas, Wilson Hobbs wrote:

“ The service to a new pupil was to trim his hair closely; then, with soap and water, to give him or her the first lesson in godliness, which was a good scrubbing, and a little red precipitate on the scalp, to supplement the use of a fine-toothed comb; then he was furnished with a suit of new clothes, and taught how to put them on and off. They all emerged from this ordeal as shy as peacocks just plucked.

For a child's view, we have *The School Days of an Indian Girl*, written in 1900 by Zitkala-Sa, a Lakota woman who entered White's Institute, a Quaker Indian boarding school in Indiana, at age eight:

“ I remember being dragged out, though I resisted by kicking and scratching wildly. In spite of myself, I was carried downstairs and tied fast in a chair. I cried aloud, shaking my head all the while until I felt the cold blades of the scissors against my neck, and heard them gnaw off one of my thick braids. Then I lost my spirit.... Our mothers had taught us that only unskilled warriors who were captured had their hair shingled by the enemy. Among our people, short hair was worn by mourners, and shingled hair by cowards! ... I moaned for my mother, but no one came to comfort me ... for now I was only one of many little animals driven by a herder.

How Quaker teachers viewed education in the Quaker Indian schools

In a letter to “Esteemed Friend,” dated Eighth Month 28, 1871, teacher Mary B. Lightfoot wrote from the Great Nemaha Reservation in Nebraska:

“According to instructions I submit the following report of the Iowa Indian school under my care. The number of pupils on list is 68, 32 boys & 36 girls, the highest number in attendance at any one time, 52. The progress of the children the past year has been satisfactory and encouraging.... These children now understand nearly all we say to them, many of them talk some & could talk well if they would, but the peculiar trait of Indian character of being averse to talking English obtains largely among the children as with the older [people] and retards their progress in acquiring the language. In spelling and writing and map and slate work they show much aptness and do well.... These children are tractable pleasant and affectionate, after we once get hold of them, and the possibility of their civilization education and culture is only a question of time and proper opportunities.

Joseph Webster, the Quaker agent among the Santee Sioux, put the goal of education succinctly:

The whole character of the Indian must be changed.

In a record book that now resides in the Quaker Collection at Haverford College, teachers at the Quaker Tunesassa Indian Boarding School noted these (selected) observations about students who left the school:

- ran away
- ran away (fourth time)
- married a white man
- sent home for persistent disobedience
- went home when father died
- went to Carlisle
- taken to Buffalo hospital for TB treatment
- graduated with honors
- killed on the railroad when drunk
- expelled for immorality
- unable to adapt herself

How Native people viewed education in the Quaker Indian schools

In his book *From the Deep Woods to Civilization*, the Lakota physician Charles Eastman remembers the humiliation he felt at the Santee School in Nebraska:

We youthful warriors were held up and harassed with ... those little words—rat, cat, and so forth—until not a semblance of our native dignity and self-respect was left.

“In his book *Native American Testimony*, anthropologist Peter Nabokov quotes a Kickapoo father telling a Quaker school recruiter:

Take that axe and knock him on the head. I will gladly bury him. I would rather you do that than take him to school.

“ Reviewing the early nineteenth-century Quaker schools among the Senecas in New York, Rayner Kelsey, general secretary of the Associated Executive Committee of Friends on Indian Affairs, wrote:

These schools were not greatly appreciated by the Indians and often had very few scholars, the boys' school even being entirely without attenders at some periods.

“ In 1875, Barclay White, who served as superintendent of all the Indian agencies in Nebraska during the Ulysses S. Grant presidency, quoted a Sac man named Ketchemo:

I am willing you may instruct our children, and teach them the white man's ways, they cannot now live upon the wild game, it is gone, destroyed by the white man's guns. As for myself, I am too old to learn new ways. I shall live the remainder of the time in the way of my fathers.

The Quaker policy of giving Native children English names

In 1869, when Friend Thomas Lightfoot was appointed agent at the Great Nemaha Reservation in Nebraska, his wife, Mary B. Lightfoot, assumed the position of teacher. In a letter to Friends in the East, Mary wrote:

Tell H. and C. I have named two little boys for them. I am giving them English names, as I cannot think of learning theirs. I have named several [children] after Friends in the East. When I get through I will send a list.

“ Friend Albert Green, who had served as agent at the Otoe and Missouri reservation in Nebraska, wrote about this practice in a 1935 letter to J. Russell Hayes at Friends Historical Library:

As part of the civilizing program, [Mary B. Lightfoot] gave to her pupils English names which they ever afterward retained.... The names she dealt out to them were of the most devout and highly esteemed Friends, such as Hallowell, Foulke, Lightfoot, Darlington, Kent, Lincoln, and other names highly esteemed among Friends. One letter [to Lightfoot from her former Native assistant teacher, after Lightfoot had left Nebraska] informs her that Maggie Kent had married Abraham Lincoln, and that Emma Darlington... had married Joe Rubideaux ... and that Millie Diament, named from my wife's first cousin had married a white man.... And that Phebe Foulke had married Benjamin Hallowell—a very good match so far as names are concerned.

What names and naming mean to Native people

N. Scott Momaday wrote several plays about the Riverside Indian Boarding School in Anadarko, Oklahoma, which was founded by Quakers. In his memoir, called *The Names*, he writes about the origin and meaning of his Kiowa name:

My name is Tsoai-talee. I am, therefore, Tsoai-talee; therefore I am. The storyteller Pohd-lohk gave me the name Tsoai-talee. He believed that a man's life proceeds from his name, in the way that a river proceeds from its source. I am.

The Choctaw poet, H. Lee Karalis, writes in the voice of a student who returns from boarding school:

“ You’re an Indian,
My father said to me.
Go dance with ‘em.
He pushed my small body
Into the smiling rhythms,
But I did not know them.
Or my name.
I remember his disappointment
As I walked away from the crowd,
Embarrassed by his words....
My father knew his name,
But he never gave me mine.

How successful were the Quaker schools in assimilating Native children?

In 1950, Myra Frye, a Kickapoo child named after a New England Friend by her teacher Elizabeth Test, wrote a tender memorial to “Teacher,” including:

When I am faced with decisions to make, I find I try to decide through how [Teacher] would have done.

Most Quaker teachers despaired of having any lasting impact on their students. Wilson Hobbs, who taught at Shawnee Mission School in Kansas, sent some of his most promising students to Ohio and Indiana to extend their education in hopes of grooming them to become teachers, but, he complained:

The Indian traits were never sufficiently stamped out of any of them to make suitable examples for the children.

“ Mary B. Lightfoot’s star student, Mary Dorian, seemed proud of her achievements in the Iowa school. In November 1876, she wrote to her retired former teacher:

“ I wish you would come see us. You don’t know how glad we would be to see you. I can wash clothes, wash dishes, and scrub floors, tables and benches, and I can sew on the machine. I made a dress for myself, a whole dress last summer. In school I can do addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, long division and compound numbers and I am studying Geography & mental arithmetic.

A year later, however, the Quaker superintendent Barclay White wrote that Mary had “left the Iowa Home, cast off citizen’s dress, and clad herself in Indian costume.” Teacher Anne Kent, who succeeded Lightfoot in the Iowa school, reported regretfully that all the educated Iowa women had similarly gone back to “the Indian life.”

What does this history mean to us, as Friends, today?

This question is not for me to answer, but to pose to Friends for individual and collective discernment. It is clear that Quakers were instrumental in promoting and implementing the forced assimilation of Native children. Through a lens of European Christian superiority, Quakers tried to remake Native children in their own image. In

their writings, I found no appreciation for what the children would lose in this process. “For their own good,” the children would be raised by Quaker teachers (removed from their own families and kinship relationships), receive English names (lose their family lineage), speak English (lose their Native languages), wear “citizens’ dress” (lose the beautiful and skillful art and handiwork of their tribes), become farmers and homemakers (lose the hunting and gathering knowledge of the land and ecology), and aspire to European lifestyles (lose competence in their own cultures and pride in their Native identities).

From our twenty-first-century vantage point, we know (or can learn) how Native people suffered and continue to suffer the consequences of actions that Friends committed 150 ago with the best of intentions. Can we hold those good intentions tenderly in one hand, and in the other hold the anguish, fear, loss, alienation, and despair borne by generations of Native Americans?

Native organizations are not asking us to judge our Quaker ancestors. They are asking, “Who are Friends today? Knowing what we know now, will Quakers join us in honest dialogue? Will they acknowledge the harm that was done? Will they seek ways to contribute toward healing processes that are desperately needed in Native communities?” These are my questions, too.

Paula Palmer’s Toward Right Relationship with Native Peoples ministry is under the care of Boulder (Colo.) Meeting. She offers Toward Right Relationship workshops in churches, schools, and colleges. Her 60-minute slide presentation on the Quaker Indian boarding schools and additional resources are posted at boulderfriendsmeeting.org/ipc-right-relationship.

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