AMERICAN INDIAN BOARDING SCHOOLS

European governments establishing colonies in the New World believed that it was their duty to spread Christianity and their way of life among the indigenous inhabitants. Looking through ethnocentric lenses, most European immigrants and their descendants saw European languages as superior and Christianity as the one true religion, which indigenous peoples needed to adopt to survive and become “civilized.” Missionaries and government officials often held a naive belief that indigenous peoples would be eager to give up their languages and cultures and convert to Christianity, and schools were seen as a key to this process. However, Jesuits and other missionaries quickly found that their overtures were often unwelcome, especially when they characterized an indigenous language as the “devil’s language.” Indigenous peoples were deeply attached to their characterizations of a language that had held back progress: “by educating the children of these tribes in the English language these differences would have disappeared, and civilization would have followed at once” (US Indian Peace Commission 1868, pp. 16–17; Reyhner and Eder 2004, p. 74).

CARLISLE INDIAN INDUSTRIAL SCHOOL

It was not till 1879 that the US government started to become involved in Indian education on a large scale. Lieut. Richard Henry Pratt (1840–1924), a commander of black troops and Indian scouts in the US Army, was instructed by the army to take Indian captives to be held in an old fort in St. Augustine, Florida. His experiences as recounted in his autobiography, Battlefield and Classroom (1964), led Pratt to believe that Indians could be educated and even become equal to whites. With the closing of the prison in St. Augustine, he persuaded some of the young prisoners to go to Hampton Institute in Virginia, a school founded to educate freed slaves. Hampton was the only school Pratt could find to accept Indian students, but he feared that, in the eyes of the public, they would become associated there with ex-slaves and suffer from the same racist attitudes many Americans held toward blacks.

To solve this problem, Pratt and his allies lobbied the US Congress to establish Carlisle Indian Industrial School in 1879 as a separate boarding school for Indians in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where there was less prejudice against Indians, especially among Mennonites and Quakers. He also believed...
in immersing young Indians in “civilization” away from what he felt were the negative influences of their families. One of his prized programs at Carlisle was to send his students out to live on white farms, often in the summer, where he insisted that they be treated as part of the family instead of as servants, so they would become completely assimilated into white culture, even possibly marrying the farmer’s daughter or son. Pratt’s policy toward the Indian was to “kill the Indian in him, and save the man” (Pratt 1973, p. 261).

Pratt was against the use of the term child races to refer to non-Caucasians, the use by missionaries of Indian languages in some of their schools, and the policy of putting Indians on reservations where they were separated from the non-Indian population. Despite Pratt’s high hopes for Indian students, most missionary and government boarding schools were not academically equal to schools for white students. The boarding schools, which usually eschewed bilingual education, needed to teach many of their students English before those students could tackle academic subjects. In addition, the half-day vocational approach of the pre–World War II boarding schools was tailored to an ideology that valued work over academic progress and often saw indigenous people as lazy. The vocational program was also a way to reduce expenditures, as students worked to keep the school running and helped to provide their own food.

After the founding of Carlisle, other off-reservation boarding schools that followed Carlisle’s curriculum were quickly established in the United States, mostly in the West. By 1902, there were twenty-five such schools, with an average attendance of 8,236 students. Although there were advanced classes at Carlisle and the larger boarding schools, including teacher-training classes, most students did not graduate, and those who did had only the equivalent of about a fifth-grade education. William Torrey Harris (1835–1909), the US commissioner of education from 1889 to 1906, described American Indians as part of the “lower races clinging to a social form of life not founded on productive industry.” However, he also supported the efforts of the commissioner of Indian affairs to provide a universal system of education that would include the establishment of “high school and college instruction” (Harris 1890, pp. 3–4). One can attribute the Indian students’ lack of success in part to the low expectations associated with racism. Yet it is also true that few non-Indian Americans in the late eighteenth century attended high school, owing to the belief that being a farmer or a farmer’s wife was a noble calling; it was assumed that Indians were also better-suited to farming than to factory or other work.

OPTIMISM CHANGES TO PESSIMISM

John H. Oberly, the US government's superintendent of Indian schools, declared in 1885, “If there were a sufficient number of reservation boarding-school-buildings to accommodate all the Indian children of school age, and these buildings could be filled and kept filled with Indian pupils, the Indian problem would be solved within the school age of the Indian child now six years old” (Oberly 1885, p. CXIII). Oberly ignored the strong attachment Indians had to their tribal cultures and the obstacles they faced integrating into a society in which, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “scientific racism” was on the rise. The historian Frederick Hoxie, in A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880–1920 (1984), documented a change in attitude in regard to the potential for education to lead to the quick and complete assimilation of Indians into the general population. Although some former boarding-school students did overcome culture shock and adjusted to living in or with white America, many re-assimilated into their tribal
American Indian Boarding Schools

societies, going “back to the blanket,” at least partially, while others sank into alcoholism or depression.

In addition, a racist attitude in many communities, especially in the West, prevented Indians from attending public schools set up by whites, which necessitated separate schools for Indians if they were to be educated. The reservation system that separated American Indians also often meant that there were no nearby schools serving non-Indians for Indian youth to attend. In the late nineteenth century, the federal government started paying public schools to take Indian students. This policy was intended, in part, to overcome racism, but it also took into account that public schools in Canada and the United States were supported by local property taxes, which Indians living on trust land did not pay. In her autobiography, Stubborn Fool, Estelle Brown, who started teaching in 1887 at Crow Creek Indian School in South Dakota, wrote that the driver of the wagon taking her out to Crow Creek boarding school told her, “Teach Injun brats. Thrown’ away good money. All them old Injuns is too lazy to work. They’d ruther starve or let the go’vernment feed ’em. Brats grow up the same way” (Brown 1952, p. 25). However, autobiographies written by teachers at Indian schools tended to portray their students in a positive light, and Indian leaders often saw the need for education to ensure the survival of their children in a rapidly changing world.

The shock faced by many non-English-speaking Indian children, who were sometimes kidnapped by government representatives in both Canada and the United States and sent to boarding schools where they could not speak the only language they knew, has been described in biographies, films, and boarding-school histories. Families were also threatened with the cutting off of rations or welfare in both Canada and the United States if they did not send their children to boarding school. An investigation of the US Indian Office by the Brookings Institute at John Hopkins University concluded in 1928 that “frankly and unequivocally . . . the provisions for the care of the Indian children in boarding schools are grossly inadequate” (Meriam et al. 1928, p. 11). The report faulted both the living conditions and educational opportunities provided students. Although some improvements were made, the first director of the Navajo Division of Education, Dillon Platero, could still report in 1975 about a young man whom he saw as a typical Navajo boarding-school graduate:

[Ke] was sent to boarding school as a child where—as was the practice—he was punished for speaking Navajo. Since he was only allowed to return home during Christmas and summer, he lost contact with his family. Kee withdrew from both the White and Navajo worlds as he grew older because he could not comfortably communicate in either language. He became one of the many thousand Navajos who were non-lingual—a man with-

out a language. By the time he was 16, Kee was an alcoholic, uneducated, and despondent—without identity. (Quoted in Reyhner and Eder 2004, p. 5)

Until the 1930s, Carlisle and most of the US boarding schools were run as military schools where students wore uniforms and were marched around. This approach aided the management of large numbers of students by limited staff. Discipline in these schools could be strict and even harsh, but this needs to be seen in the context of the forms of discipline, including corporal punishment, used in non-Indian schools of the time. John Collier (1884–1968), who served longer than any other commissioner of Indian affairs, was a romantic who saw something in American Indians that was lacking in modern man. Serving as commissioner from 1933 to 1945, he tried to close boarding schools but had only limited success because there were often no local schools to take in their students. When discipline relaxed, especially during the civil rights and Red Power movements beginning in the 1960s, drinking and other antisocial behavior increased dramatically in boarding schools, a situation that helped lead to the closing of several Indian schools in the United States.

When a more conservative US Congress tried to terminate the reservation system after World War II, most tribes opposed the effort and supported the idea of Indian self-determination. As a result, four off-reservation boarding schools, as well as some on-reservation boarding schools, were kept open; these schools remained open as of 2012.

CANADA

Whereas government support of boarding schools run by churches was phased out in the United States in the last decade of the nineteenth century, in Canada residential schools, especially those run by Catholics, Anglicans, and the United Church of Canada, were not completely closed until 1996. If anything, these schools were even more underfunded than the US boarding schools, and the Canadian government maintained no effective oversight of them, leading to widespread abuses. J. R. Miller, in his comprehensive history of Canadian Native residential schools, Shingwauk’s Vision (1997), documents many instances of maltreatment, as well as several cases where interracial marriage among school staff was discouraged.

In March 1998, the Canadian government issued a Statement of Reconciliation, including an apology to those people who were sexually or physically abused while attending residential schools. The Canadian government also funded an Aboriginal Healing Foundation, with $350 million for community-based projects focusing on addressing the legacy of physical and sexual abuse at Indian residential schools. In 2006, a Settlement Agreement was reached with the Canadian government, and a Truth and Reconciliation Commission received a
five-year mandate to learn the truth about what happened in the residential schools and to inform all Canadians about its findings.

APOLOGIES AND HEALING

The 1996 Canadian Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples reported on the “grievous harms suffered by countless Aboriginal children, families, and communities as a result of the residential school system” (quoted in Milloy 1999, p. 303). In 1998, the Canadian Minister of Indian Affairs declared,

One aspect of our relationship with Aboriginal people over this period that requires particular attention is the Residential School system. The system separated many children from their families and communities and prevented them from speaking their own languages and from learning about their heritage and cultures. In the worst cases, it left legacies of personal pain and distress that continue to reverberate in Aboriginal communities to this day. Tragically, some children were the victims of physical and sexual abuse. (Quoted in Milloy 1999, pp. 303–304)

In 2007, the United Nations adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, with only four countries in opposition—Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States. The declaration confirms the right of indigenous peoples to control the education of their children. Soon afterward, all four abstaining countries bowed to pressure to change their position. In 2008, Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd issued an apology to his country’s Aboriginal population, especially for the “stolen generation” of children taken from their parents between 1869 and 1969, many put into boarding schools operated by religious groups and some into foster homes. Some Australians actually saw racial intermixing as a way to “whiten” Aboriginals, thus solving Australia’s “Aboriginal problem.”

Under pressure after Rudd’s apology, Canada’s prime minister, Stephen Harper, in a June 11, 2008, speech to the House of Commons, acknowledged and apologized for the ongoing generational impact of Canada’s residential schools for Indians:

We now recognize that, in separating children from their families, we undermined the ability of many to adequately parent their own children and sowed the seeds for generations to follow…. Not only did you suffer these abuses as children, but as you became parents, you were powerless to protect your own children from suffering the same experience, and for this we are sorry.

On April 29, 2009, the Vatican, in a Communiqué of the Holy See Press Office in Canada, released an official statement from Pope Benedict XVI:

His Holiness recalled that since the earliest days of her presence in Canada, the Church, particularly through her missionary personnel, has closely accompanied the indigenous peoples. Given the sufferings that some indigenous children experienced in the Canadian Residential School system, the Holy Father expressed his sorrow at the anguish caused by the deplorable conduct of some members of the Church and he offered his sympathy and prayerful solidarity…. He prayed that all those affected would experience healing, and he encouraged First Nations Peoples to continue to move forward with renewed hope.

Token efforts to reverse assimilationist schooling that devalues indigenous languages and cultures, and that has led to a persistent academic achievement gap between indigenous and nonindigenous students, remain largely ineffectual. However, in New Zealand and Hawaii, these efforts are showing promise in schools that begin the education of Maori and Hawaiian children by immersing them in their heritage language.

SEE ALSO Historical Trauma; Indian Slavery; Indigenous; Reservation System.

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AMERICAN INDIAN MOVEMENT (AIM)
The American Indian Movement (AIM) is an activist organization dedicated to protecting indigenous peoples’ rights around the world. AIM’s founders and continuing leadership have been American Indians, however, and its agenda and protests have focused primarily on issues of concern to Native North Americans. AIM was founded in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1968 as an Indian rights organization that monitored law enforcement treatment of Native people in American cities. AIM chapters quickly became established in several US cities, including Cleveland, Denver, and Milwaukee, and AIM’s initial membership was drawn from the ranks of the urban Indian population. AIM’s early, and perhaps best-known leaders, included Clyde and Vernon Bellecourt, Dennis Banks, and Russell Means.

AIM’S BACKGROUND
American Indian resistance movements have existed throughout US history, although early Indian collective actions often were officially defined by the US government as “wars,” and they were thus responded to by the US military. During the nineteenth century there were numerous Native American “revitalization” movements, such as the Ghost Dance in the West and the Handsome Lake revival among the Iroquois in the East. Such movements had an important spiritual dimension and emphasized the elimination of European influence and the return of native traditions and communities. In the twentieth century, American Indian rights organizations emerged to represent Indian interests locally and nationally; these included the Society of American Indians (1911), the Indian Defense League of America (1926), the National Congress of American Indians (1944), the National Indian Youth Council (1961), and Women of All Red Nations (1974). The 1960s ushered in an era of Indian protest activism, beginning with a series of “fish-ins” protesting legal restrictions of traditional tribal fishing rights in the Pacific Northwest and the nineteen-month occupation of Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay by “Indians of All Tribes” protesting the living conditions and rights violations of urban Indians. Although AIM did not organize the fish-ins or the Alcatraz occupation, the intertribal, nationally publicized native-rights focus of both protests served as a template for much of AIM’s activism, and many who had been involved in 1960s protests became associated with AIM in the 1970s.

AIM emerged not only from a rich history of American Indian protest activism. The organization was formed during a period of US history marked by the African American civil rights movement and anti–Vietnam War activism. Although there were few formal links between AIM and civil rights organizations, the ethnic pride, racial grievances, and political demands of civil rights leaders and activists resonated with the dissatisfaction, needs, and resentments of many urban and reservation Indians. AIM blended civil rights and antiwar protest strategies—such as marches, demonstrations, occupations, and sit-ins—with Indian symbolic targets and repertoires of resistance, such as the “capture” of the Mount Rushmore in 1970, a brief occupation of Mount Rushmore in 1971, the “Longest Walk” from San Francisco to Washington, DC, in 1978, and the encampment at Camp Yellow Thunder in South Dakota’s Black Hills in the 1980s. The following description, from a New York Times article by Grace Lichtenstein, of a 1976 protest against a commemoration of the Battle of Little Bighorn illustrates the rich and confrontational dramaturgy associated with much AIM activism:

Today on a wind-buffeted hill covered with buffalo grass, yellow clover and sage, in southeastern Montana where George Armstrong Custer made his last stand, about 150 Indians from various tribes danced joyously around the monument to the Seventh Cavalry dead. Meanwhile at an official National Parks Service ceremony about 100 yards away, an Army band played... Just as the ceremony got underway a caravan of Sioux, Cheyenne and other Indians led by Russell Means, the American Indian Movement leader, strode to the platform and the pounding of a drum. (Lichtenstein 1976)