

Steps on the Healing Journey: Investigating the Pipestone Indian Boarding School Archival Records for Survivors, Descendants, Tribes, and National Park Visitors

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we detail our approach to digitizing, researching, and developing a messaging plan around the archival records from Pipestone Indian Boarding School, a federally run industrial training school that operated from 1893–1953 in southwest Minnesota. We begin by discussing the history of the sacred Pipestone quarries, why the federal government built a boarding school there, and how the quarries went from being protected treaty land to being designated a national monument. We then describe how our project was initiated in response to feedback received in government-to-government consultation between Pipestone National Monument and 23 Tribal Nations with historical ties to the sacred quarries. Tribal partners expressed that they want the full truth about the school known and acknowledged, and they want the public to be educated about what they and their relatives experienced at the school. Our team worked closely with consulting Tribes and Native communities to develop a research plan, bring archival documentation to light, and discuss future public engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Modeled after Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, Pipestone Indian Boarding School in southwest Minnesota opened its doors in 1893. Over the 60-year period it was in operation roughly 4,000 Native children from over 40 different tribes were taken to the boarding school to be harshly stripped of their cultures, languages, and belief systems. The goal was to refashion them into White-acting, English-speaking, Christian, productive low-wage workers. In the militaristic environment of the school, cut off from their families and communities, three generations of children were subject to Richard Henry Pratt's version of assimilation, honed at Carlisle, which he described as immersing Native children in White civilization and "holding them there until they are thoroughly soaked."²

Our team, consisting of archivists, scholars, and staff from the National Native American Boarding School

Healing Coalition, National Park Service (NPS) Mellon Humanities Fellowship Program, and Pipestone National Monument,³ has digitized and explored a subset of records from Pipestone Indian Boarding School, seeking to understand what life was like for children at the school, how they and their families mitigated and resisted the onslaught of assimilationist tactics, and how learning about the experiences of the children in the school can help heal some of the harm that was caused to boarding school survivors, their descendants, and the Tribal Nations the children were taken from.⁴ In this article, we describe the history of the area and why the school was built there, how our project was initiated as a result of government-to-government consultation, how the team was formed and funded, and the process we followed to create a messaging plan for Pipestone Indian Boarding School with descendants and representatives of consulting Tribal Nations. While we briefly characterize what life



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was like for children at the school, our team leaves it to descendants and Tribal Nations to choose what stories from the archives to tell and how they will be told. We begin with a brief sketch of the history of the Pipestone quarries and how the school and national monument were built on an ancient sacred site revered by many Tribal Nations on the Great Plains.

PIPESTONE, THE BLOOD OF THE PEOPLE

Pipestone can refer to many things—a town, a county, a national monument, the site of an Indian boarding school—but these names all derive from a type of soft red stone. This kind of pipestone, found in only one small deposit in southwest Minnesota, is buried underneath a dozen feet of nearly impenetrable Sioux quartzite. Pipestone is an extremely rare mineral that has been carefully hand-quarried for millennia, used by Plains Tribes to make the *canunpa* (Lakota, Nakota, Dakota), or sacred Pipe, that is central to the belief systems of many Tribal Nations in the region. Tribal Representatives stress that Pipestone is sacred and has always been so.

In one version of the story recounted by Lame Deer, a spiritual leader of the *Oceti Sakowin* (Seven Fires), pipestone was formed when *Unktehi*, a water serpent, was fighting the humans and caused a great flood.⁵ As water rose the people sought higher and higher ground:

Finally everything was flooded except the hill next to the place where the sacred red pipestone quarry lies today. The people climbed up there to save themselves, but it was no use. The water swept over that hill. Waves tumbled the rocks and pinnacles, smashing them down on the people. Everyone was killed, and all the blood jelled, making one big pool. The blood turned to pipestone and created the pipestone quarry, the grave of those ancient ones.⁶

But not everyone was killed. One young woman climbed to the highest point of the quartzite cliffs and prayed. A large *Wamblee Gleska*, or spotted eagle, flew down and turned into a man. The two eventually married and their descendants created the *Oceti Sakowin* Nation, an eagle nation.

In the cosmology of the *Oceti Sakowin*, as well as other Tribal Nations, pipestone is the literal blood of the people. For over 3,000 years, many groups living in the area quarried the red stone for their sacred pipes. Pipestone pipes were widely traded and have been found in archaeological contexts in sites as far away as Alabama and Oklahoma.⁷ Directly south of the quarries is another ancient sacred site, the Three Maidens. These enormous glacial erratics, or giant boulders, sacred to many Tribal

Nations, rest on a quartzite bed where human and animal figures, along with spirals and symbols, have been carefully etched into the stone by people who visited here long ago. Most of the 23 Tribal Nations who have historical associations with the Pipestone quarries say that it was always considered neutral ground. When different groups visited, they would lay down their weapons and procure their stone unharmed.

IHANKTONWAN STEWARDSHIP

When Lewis and Clark were traveling near the area with their famed expedition in August of 1804, William Clark described the Pipestone quarries as “a place of Peace with all nations.”⁸ His description was based on information provided to him by French trapper Pierre Dorion Sr., who was married to an Ihanktonwan (Yankton) woman, and had joined the expedition briefly to serve as an interpreter for Lewis and Clark when they visited the large Ihanktonwan villages to trade. By the early 1800s, the Pipestone quarries were part of the vast territory held by the Ihanktonwan, or Yankton Sioux Tribe, a Nakota-speaking part of the *Oceti Sakowin* Oyate. After the Lewis and Clark expedition, many explorers and fur traders visited the quarries, including Joseph Nicollet, who carved his name on the quartzite cliffs, and George Catlin, who painted the prairies and people he found there, later publishing many descriptions of his adventures in the press.

Treaties signed in 1825 and 1837 between the US and some of the *Oceti Sakowin* Tribes began to open land in Minnesota for White settlement. By 1849, when Minnesota became a territory, the Ihanktonwan, along with other eastern *Oceti Sakowin* Tribes, were under extreme pressure from westward expansion, and violence was breaking out between White settlers and Tribal Nations. In the Treaty of 1858, the Ihanktonwan ceded roughly 11 million acres of their territory to the US government, keeping about 400,000 acres for a permanent reservation, in exchange for \$1,600,000 paid over a 50-year period, agricultural and education assistance, and protection. There was an unusual section in the treaty, however, that stipulated the Ihanktonwan would retain the Pipestone quarries, located over 150 miles from their reservation:

The said Yankton Indians shall be secured in the free and unrestricted use of the red pipe-stone quarry, or so much as they have been accustomed to frequent and use for the purpose of procuring stone for pipes; and the United States hereby stipulate and agree to cause to be surveyed and marked so much thereof as shall be necessary and proper for that purpose, and retain the same and keep it open and free to the Indians to visit and procure stone for pipes so long as they shall desire.⁹

Ihanktonwan oral histories describe how the headmen who were pressured to sign the treaty refused to sign it, even under threat of death, unless this section was included in the treaty.¹⁰ It was very irregular for treaties of this era to make these types of concessions, giving credence to the idea that the Ihanktonwan would sign only if they retained stewardship of the sacred Pipestone quarries. The Ihanktonwan and other historically associated Tribal Nations view the sacred quarries as a kinship relation. Rather than possessing the land, they have stewardship responsibilities to the land. The earth is not for extraction, but reciprocity. In the past and still today, many Indigenous people stop and make offerings to the Three Maidens before coming to quarry pipestone.

THE TOWN OF PIPESTONE

Just a few years later, in the 1860s, the Ihanktonwan were hearing reports that fur traders were quarrying Pipestone and selling pipes as part of their trade offerings. Rumors also circulated that soldiers camping near the quarries had disturbed mounds nearby. While the Ihanktonwan told congressional investigators about these violations on their treaty land, the government never responded to the complaint. By 1870, as settlers flooded into southwest Minnesota, surveyors began to divide Pipestone County into sections and townships. Despite the language of

The Ihanktonwan and other historically associated Tribal Nations view the sacred quarries as a kinship relation.

the treaty, the reservation around the quarries was not marked, and a few homesteaders staked their claims on Ihanktonwan land. This was corrected a year later when a one-square-mile reservation with the Pipestone quarries at its center was resurveyed and marked. The homesteader claims were later dissolved.

In 1876, the town of Pipestone was officially founded a mile south of the sacred quarries, with town officials promising to respect and enforce “the rights of the Indians to the Indian reservation.”¹¹ That same year, after returning home from a quarrying trip, the Ihanktonwan informed their agent that White settlers were taking quartzite from the quarries and using it to build their town, and that homes had been built within the boundaries of their reservation. Over the next ten years, Ihanktonwan leaders fought in the courts to protect their treaty land and keep settlers out of the sacred quarries. Meanwhile the town of Pipestone boomed in population as railroads connected the town with the rest of the

United States. The railroads made it more cost-effective to ship the valuable Sioux quartzite to market, and many downtown buildings built with the pink stone mined by the early settlers of Pipestone still stand today.¹²

Finally, in 1887, after a Supreme Court victory, and with the support of the secretary of the interior and 10 soldiers sent from Fort Randall in Ihanktonwan Territory, the Ihanktonwan were able to evict the squatters from their sacred quarries.¹³ A few years after this, the Ihanktonwan were horrified upon returning to their reservation at Pipestone to find that the huge bed of ancient petroglyphs underlying the Three Maidens on the southern boundary of the reservation had been chiseled out of the ground and taken away. One of the town of Pipestone’s founders, Charles Bennett, had taken it upon himself to remove 36 enormous slabs of quartzite, claiming he was protecting the petroglyphs from vandals. Bennett added most of the slabs to his collection at his drugstore in town, where he also sold raw pipestone as well as completed works, likely profiting from the display. A few of the slabs were reportedly shared with others and have never been recovered.¹⁴ The remaining petroglyph slabs are now housed at Pipestone National Monument.

PIPESTONE INDIAN BOARDING SCHOOL

It was Charles Bennett, along with fellow quartzite miner L.H. Moore, who drafted the petition to Congress to establish an Indian boarding school at Pipestone. As interest in building Indian boarding schools to assimilate Native youth grew upon the perceived success of Pratt’s educational philosophy, Bennett and Moore saw an opportunity to bring federal funding into their growing community.¹⁵ The petition was supported, becoming a bill that was eventually signed into law in 1891. Three industrial and training schools modeled after Carlisle were to be built: one in Wisconsin, another in Michigan, and the third on the Pipestone Reservation. Its first building, a large, three-story structure built from Sioux quartzite at a cost of \$30,000, housed the entire school and had space for 50 children to sleep. The Pipestone Indian Industrial School opened in February 1893 and grew quickly, its campus encompassing 56 buildings by the time the school closed 60 years later (Figure 1).

The first class of children came from a school at Kenosha, Wisconsin: six children from the Menominee, Stockbridge, and Ojibwe tribes.¹⁶ After this, most of the children were taken to the school by the superintendent, who traveled to Indian Agencies in Minnesota, South Dakota, and states beyond on recruiting trips every summer (Figure 2).



▲ **FIGURE 1.** Colorized postcard: “Ready for Dinner, Pipestone Indian School.”

► **FIGURE 2.** Superintendent Balmer and children from Pipestone Indian Boarding School. BOTH COURTESY OF PIPESTONE HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Some came to the school by railroad. Once at the boarding school, the children followed a regimented daily schedule involving little rest. After waking at 6:15, the children completed one work detail, usually cleaning, before academic and industrial classes started at 9:00 am. When classes were over at 4:00 pm, another hour of work was completed before dinner. Bedtime was 7:30 pm for younger children and 9:00 pm for older children. On Saturdays, the children worked for 3½ hours before being allowed to go to town for the remainder of the day. The industrial training the children were expected to perform included farm labor, caring for livestock, working with machinery used for the kitchen and laundry, and glazing, or crafting, windows. These activities took up half of the children’s school day, and the other half, only about three hours, was spent on traditional academic classroom learning. During the summer, children were strongly encouraged and at times forced to stay at the school. Many were placed into an “outing system” where they were expected to stay in the homes of local farmers and residents and perform farm work and chores for the families for very low or no wages.¹⁷

Children from at least 40 Tribal Nations were taken to Pipestone Indian Boarding School over the years it was in operation from 1893–1953. For many of these children, the quarries were a sacred place. Children at the school spent much of the scant free time they were given climbing the quartzite rocks, swimming in the pond, and running on the prairies surrounding the quarries, taking solace in the natural beauty of the sacred site. In *Pipestone: My Life in an Indian Boarding School*, Adam Fortunate Eagle recalls feeling conflicted as he headed back to the boys’ dormitory after meeting quarriers and enjoying their stories of the past. He asked Superintendent Balmer about it later, saying, “I’m in an Indian boarding school run by the American government. It’s the same government some of my friends’ families fought against.” Balmer replied, “The

government has a policy to assimilate young Indians into society.” Fortunate Eagle remembers thinking, “I don’t understand what he says, but it doesn’t sound good.”¹⁸

By the post-World War II era, a change in administrations brought a new federal policy of withdrawal from Indian affairs, implementing a three-part program of compensation, relocation, and termination. The federal government was seeking to disband Tribal Nations as sovereign, independent entities and relocate Tribal members away from their homes on reservations to large cities throughout the US.¹⁹ Large, federally run boarding schools did not fit into this plan, and by 1948, discussions about closing Pipestone Indian Boarding School were already underway, including whether the hospital would also close and what to do with all the industrial training equipment. Enrollment dwindled in its final years of operation and in 1953, the school was finally closed. The buildings were auctioned off or torn down, except for one remaining building, the Superintendent’s House, which still stands but is in serious disrepair. In the 1960s, Minnesota West Community College was built on the former grounds of Pipestone Indian Boarding School.

YANKTON SIOUX TRIBE OF INDIANS v. UNITED STATES

In the decades after the school was built, the Ihanhtonwan continued to visit their sacred quarries, procuring pipestone and making sacred pipes. They also continued to fight in the courts for their ownership of the Pipestone Reservation to be upheld. As a repercussion of the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887, the Agreement of 1894 forced the Ihanhtonwan to cede huge portions of their reservation land east of the Missouri River in South Dakota, but they refused to sign

unless language referring to their interest in quarries was included.²⁰ The agreement, ratified by Congress, stated that the matter of ownership of the Pipestone Reservation would be referred to the Supreme Court within one year of ratification. Failure to do so would be construed as “a waiver of the United States of all right to ownership of the Pipestone Reservation, and the same shall thereafter be solely the property of the Yankton tribe of Sioux Indians.”²¹ When exactly one year had passed and Secretary of the Interior Michael Hoke Smith failed to refer the matter of ownership to the Supreme Court, the Ihanktonwan immediately asked Smith to provide certification that they held title to the sacred quarries and the surrounding land. He refused. For the next few decades, the Tribe continued to pursue all legal means to have their rights over the Pipestone Reservation acknowledged and enforced. Finally, in 1920, an opportunity arose when Congress passed a law authorizing “the Sioux Tribe of Indians” to submit claims to the Court of Claims.²²

In 1925, the Court of Claims decided that the provision in the Treaty of 1858 conferred only the right of the Ihanktonwan to quarry pipestone, rather than outright ownership of the quarries. The Ihanktonwan immediately asked the Supreme Court to review the decision and in 1926, it ruled that the Agreement of 1894 had indeed confirmed the title of the Yankton Sioux Tribe to the sacred quarries. However, the Supreme Court also decided that the United States had, in essence, acquired the reservation through eminent domain and rather than returning the land, the Ihanktonwan were entitled to a monetary settlement calculated at roughly \$325,000. The decision also noted that the Ihanktonwan were still entitled to free and unfettered access to quarry pipestone at the site.²³

PIPESTONE NATIONAL MONUMENT

Immediately after the decision, the state of Minnesota moved to create a state park at the quarry site. The Department of the Interior claimed that the federal government had control over the area due to the quarrying rights of the Ihanktonwan, saying it should be made into a national monument or park instead. By the early 1930s, citizens of Pipestone formed an organization, Pipestone Indian Shrine Association, dedicated to lobbying the government for the establishment of a national park. They did not envision a recreational-type park, but rather a space to protect and preserve the rights of Native people to quarry the sacred stone. The Ihanktonwan people opposed the creation of the park, believing the quarries to be part of their treaty territory and under their stewardship.²⁴ After years of political maneuvering, Pipestone National Monument was founded and became part of the National Park System in 1937.²⁵ The

language of the congressional legislation did allow for free quarrying rights to Native people of all Tribal Nations and active pipestone quarrying has persisted at the monument into the present through an annual permitting system open to enrolled members of federally recognized Tribes.²⁶

For nearly a hundred years, Pipestone National Monument has maintained oversight of the pipestone, Sioux quartzite, and multiple other cultural and natural resources of the sacred quarries and surrounding prairies. Today, Pipestone National Monument maintains robust and meaningful consulting relationships with 23 historically affiliated, federally recognized Tribal Nations: the Ihanktonwan, Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, Crow Creek Sioux Tribe, Flandreau Santee Sioux Tribe, Fort Peck Assiniboine & Sioux Tribes, Iowa Tribe of Kansas & Nebraska, Iowa Tribe of Oklahoma, Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, Lower Sioux Indian Community in the state of Minnesota, Mandan Hidatsa Arikara Nation, Oglala Lakota Nation, Omaha Tribe of Nebraska, Otoe-Missouria Tribe, Ponca Tribe of Nebraska, Ponca Tribe of Oklahoma, Prairie Island Indian Community, Rosebud Sioux Tribe, Santee Sioux Tribe, Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community, Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate of the Lake Traverse Reservation, Spirit Lake Dakota Tribe, Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, and Upper Sioux Indian Community.²⁷

Dialogue about the Pipestone Boarding School has been part of formal consultation between monument staff and the 23 historically affiliated Tribal Nations since 2021. Tribal partners have expressed that they want the full truth about the school to be known and, even more importantly, believed, and they want the public to understand the harmful repercussions of what they and their relatives experienced. To this end, Pipestone National Monument and the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (NABS) formed a partnership in 2022 to formulate a plan to digitize and research records related to Pipestone Indian Boarding School held by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), beginning the process of educating park visitors about the experiences of children at the school.

THE NATIONAL NATIVE AMERICAN BOARDING SCHOOL HEALING COALITION

NABS was formed as a 501(c)3 non-profit organization in June 2012 with the express purpose of developing a national strategy to bring awareness to and address the intergenerational trauma of the impacts of the federal Indian boarding school policies in the United States. Known as the Boarding School Healing Project prior to 2012, NABS was created by a group of Native leaders and Tribal Elders from throughout the United States, as well as two Canadian Truth and Reconciliation commissioners, Willie Little

Child and Marie Wilson. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, having commenced in 2008 with the mission to document the history and lasting impacts of Canada's residential schools system on Indigenous Peoples, offered the Boarding School Healing Project an opportunity to expand the dialogue in the United States. With the support and guidance of the Native American Rights Fund, NABS was formed to take on the work of pushing for a national commission on Indian boarding schools in the United States, to bring awareness to the intergenerational impacts, and to seek accountability from complicit entities.

Since its formation, NABS has identified over 500 Indian boarding school institutions in 38 states—a research inquiry that began well before the US federal government had any interest in conducting one. When Deb Haaland became the first Native American woman to become the US secretary of the interior, NABS was invited to enter into a memorandum of understanding with the federal government to share data, methodology, and best practices of Indian boarding school research—an effort that would ultimately produce two historic documents within the newly created Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative. NABS worked alongside the Department of the Interior to research and compile Volume 1 of the *Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report*, published in May 2022, as well as Volume 2, which was published in July 2024.²⁸ Together, these two volumes comprise the first official comprehensive investigation into the federal Indian boarding school policy era and were fundamental to a spike in awareness and concern in social, political, and cultural spaces in the United States. NABS continues to develop a diverse array of programming centering those that attended Indian boarding schools and their descendants, including healing circles, oral history programs, digital archives preservation and access, educational curriculum and experiential learning opportunities, and policy/advocacy work.

THE STORYTELLING GRANT AND THE MELLON HUMANITIES FOUNDATION POST-DOCTORAL FELLOWSHIP

In 2022, Pipestone National Monument and NABS formed a partnership to digitize school records from Pipestone Indian Boarding School, make them accessible through the National Indian Boarding School Digital Archive (NIBSDA), engage with descendant communities, and develop interpretive media. The work was funded by a Storytelling Grant from the National Park Foundation (NPF). This partnership led to the development of a two-year Mellon Foundation post-doctoral fellowship to research the school, its culture, and the children who attended.²⁹ Our team, consisting of park staff from

Pipestone National Monument, digital archivists from NABS, and the Mellon Fellow, formed in 2023.

We began by formulating a Best Practices and Methodologies statement, addressing what we perceived as ethical issues common to projects involving Tribal Nations and descendent communities.³⁰ First, we acknowledged that this history belongs to Pipestone Indian Boarding School survivors, descendants, and the Tribal Nations the children were taken from. Researchers working on our team must have written consent from Tribal Nations for use of archival, written historical, or oral historical material related to them in any peer-reviewed publication, conference presentation, book, film, or any other published product. At the end of the project, all research notes, records, documents, and photos will be returned to NABS and NPS. Written consent must be

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obtained for all interviews, and knowledge holders and Tribal Representatives must be paid for their time and travel expenses. All messaging content will be founded in facts gained through the archival record, oral histories, and personal experiences. Warnings must be provided for all potentially traumatic or triggering content. Our team committed to working very closely with consulting Tribal Nations to conduct research and create a messaging and educational plan that aligned with their project goals, checked in with them regularly on progress made, and incorporated their thoughts and concerns at every stage. For our team, these best practices were intended to mitigate some of the problems commonly created when non-Native people interpret history without the consent, involvement, or input of Tribal Nations and communities. However, our best practices were not always able to fully account for every scenario we encountered and will continue to be shaped by Tribal input.

DIGITIZING THE RECORDS

Records related to the Pipestone Indian Boarding School are mainly housed at the National Archives in Kansas City, Missouri (NARA-KC). Digitizing the records is essential to making these historically significant materials accessible to the communities most concerned: Indian boarding school survivors, descendants, and Tribal Nations. NARA-KC

holds the records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, or Record Group 75, which documents Pipestone’s administration and student life across multiple decades. Typical series include school registers and attendance books, correspondence, annual reports, photographs, financial records, and—our most crucial resource—student case files. These contain applications, outing records, letters from parents and relatives, and medical or discipline materials. Bringing these collections into a searchable, community-accessible environment helps families, researchers, and Tribal Nations reconstruct histories that have long been scattered or difficult to obtain. While these records are significant, it also needs to be remembered that often they were authored by administrators who lacked cultural knowledge and empathy for the students and families in their care.

A team of scanning technicians trained by NABS spent approximately eight weeks at NARA–KC in 2023. The goal was to digitize over 300 student case files and other documents related to student experiences at Pipestone Indian Boarding School, consisting of 80,000–100,000 pages of records. Our workflow began with glancing through boxes to identify Pipestone-specific series and prioritize items based on research value and community requests. We used non-destructive Scansnap SV600 scanning equipment and a cloud-based backup service that stores copies of PDFs for access. Each item is tracked with consistent file-naming and scanning logs; post-capture processing includes applying redactions when sensitive information is present, ensuring page orientation is uniform, and applying OCR (optical character recognition technology) to enhance searchability. Metadata follows Dublin Core elements, with community-requested fields—traditional names, Tribal Nations, dates, places, languages, and relationships—so that family connections, school years, and subject keywords can discover records.

Because many school records contain sensitive personal and cultural information, access decisions are made in consultation with represented Tribal communities and guided by Indigenous data sovereignty principles. We implement tiered access, content warnings, and, when needed, selective redaction for highly sensitive fields such as student tribal enrollment information. This approach respects survivors and descendants while supporting truth-telling, accountability, and research. After quality control, digitized files and metadata are ingested into NIBSDA, which can be searched alongside related collections. For Pipestone-related holdings, we also work to connect records through partnerships in the region, including collaboration opportunities with Pipestone National Monument and Tribal Historic Preservation Offices (THPOs), to host in-

person listening sessions with Tribes who are affected by Pipestone Indian Boarding School. The result is a responsibly curated, context-rich set of materials that supports family research, education, and community healing—while building a sustainable workflow for ongoing description, stewardship, and respectful access to Pipestone Indian Boarding School records.

RESEARCH AND REMEMBRANCE

The Mellon Fellow began researching the digitized records from Pipestone Indian Boarding School contained within NIBSDA in the fall of 2023. While the records are not complete, they provide a window into what life was like for children who attended the school and how their families back home attempted to support and maintain relationships with them. Reading through hundreds of student files and thousands of documents, patterns begin to emerge. For the more than 4,000 children who were taken to Pipestone over the 60 years it operated, school life was dominated by hard work and harsh discipline. Based on first-hand accounts and letters found in the archival materials, the food they were given was of poor quality and there was never enough to go around. Letters, clothing, money, and gifts sent to school children by their parents were often not given to them. Surgeries were performed without parental consent. Evidence also shows that several children were taken to Pipestone without parental consent and were not returned when the violation of parental rights was pointed out to school officials. Many children ran away from the school, but they were usually caught, returned, and punished, most often turned in by locals who received monetary rewards for turning in runaway children. These findings mirrored the stories told by descendants of Pipestone Indian Boarding School survivors in formal consultation with Pipestone National Monument. While most survivors and descendants have difficult and negative feelings about the school, some survivors have talked and written about positive experiences there. We leave room for their perspectives in our work.

Our team sought assistance formulating an interpretive plan and crafting messages that honor the experiences of the children that lived and died at the school, communicate truths about the school to a public audience, and educate about the impact of the boarding schools on Native families and communities. To this end, we used funds from the Mellon Fellowship to contract with experienced landscape architects to help the team work with consulting Tribal Representatives and descendant communities to develop messaging themes and place them in the landscape to educate visitors about Pipestone Indian Boarding School. After putting out a request for proposals and interviewing three firms, our team

chose to work with Ten x Ten Studios. The Minneapolis-based design team came highly recommended by representatives of consulting Tribal Nations and had successfully navigated work on sensitive projects in areas of Minnesota sacred to many Tribes.

Engagement with consulting Tribal Nations and descendant communities affected by Pipestone Indian Boarding School occurred over a period of several years throughout every phase of the plan and continues today. Tribal consultation includes written consultation, annual in-person consultation meetings, and virtual consultation meetings. In addition to formal consultation, the archival team from NABS visited two of the consulting Tribal Nations and conducted community listening sessions focused on the digital records, interacting with descendants of Pipestone Indian Boarding School survivors and showing community members how to access information about their relatives.

As a result of our team's research into the archival records from Pipestone Indian Boarding School, consulting relationships with 14 additional Tribal Nations were initiated in 2024: Bois Forte Band of Chippewa, Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Fort Belknap Indian Community, Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, Menominee Tribe, Meskwaki Nation, Oneida Tribe, Red Lake Nation, Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohicans, White Earth Nation, and Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska. All these newly consulting Tribal Nations had children from their

children taken away to the school and how much time it would take to identify all the Tribal Nations and descendant communities that were affected. We will likely continue to identify new Tribes and initiate new consulting relationships as our research progresses.

After the first few government-to-government meetings about the boarding school records, we received feedback that the discussions were causing trauma to some participants and that there was a need for mental health support at meetings. Staff at Pipestone National Monument reached out to the Flandreau Santee Sioux Tribal Health Clinic located nearby and arranged to have a culturally competent mental health practitioner present at all subsequent meetings. This professional would take the group through grounding exercises at difficult moments and was available to group members if they needed support during discussions or breaks. This eventually sparked a discussion about the need for after-care by mental health professionals in people's home communities, and not just during meetings, to process intergenerational grief and trauma related to Pipestone Indian Boarding School.³²

In October 2024, the design team held a two-day engagement event with Tribal Representatives in Pipestone at Minnesota West Community College, which, as noted earlier, was built on the former grounds of Pipestone Indian Boarding School. While consultation with the 23 historically associated Tribal Nations, along with the newly added 14 Tribal Nations who had children taken to the school, are typically attended by THPOs or other government officials, this two-day in-person engagement event was different. All 10 attendees were descended from Pipestone Boarding School survivors. Our team, the design team, and the 10 participants engaged in discussions and activities and walked the grounds of the former school. The representatives offered their stories and thoughts about what a messaging plan for Pipestone Indian Boarding School should include and what would be healing for them. In the months following the engagement event, the design team took the feedback and grouped it into four overarching draft themes to guide the messaging plan and interpretive products.

Once the draft themes were formulated, our team spent six months seeking feedback from the 37 consulting Tribal Nations on how they felt about the draft themes and whether they thought anything had been left out. During this phase, our team visited two of the consulting Tribes and held community feedback sessions where we discussed our approach, the crafting of the messaging

Through our research, our team was surprised to discover that an estimated 4,000 children attended Pipestone Indian Boarding School, a number much higher than the characterization of “many hundreds” in previous research.

communities taken to the school at Pipestone between the years 1893–1953. Some Tribal Nations expressed concern that they hadn't been consulted about our research earlier in the process and we acknowledge that we should have initiated these relationships sooner. Through our research, our team was surprised to discover that an estimated 4,000 children attended Pipestone Indian Boarding School, a number much higher than the characterization of “many hundreds” in previous research.³¹ We were not adequately prepared for the number of different Tribes who had



FIGURE 3. Five messaging themes formulated based on feedback from descendants of survivors of Pipestone Indian Boarding School.

plan, and the draft themes. At both feedback sessions, descendants of survivors of Pipestone Indian Boarding School attended and shared their feelings about how to best memorialize their relatives and what would feel healing for them.

Copies of the draft plan were distributed to the consulting Tribal Nations and feedback was emailed back to the team. Based on in-person and virtual feedback, one additional draft theme was added, giving us five messaging themes (Figure 3, above). In June 2025, at the annual in-person two-day formal Tribal consultation meetings held in Pipestone, the second day focused on the Pipestone Indian Boarding School research and messaging plan. The draft themes were discussed, thoughts and stories were shared about the plan, and the group began to envision how the five themes could best be situated on the landscape of the former school grounds and Pipestone National Monument. This was followed by a virtual consultation event a week later, where the same information was shared and feedback was sought to make sure our messaging plan was in alignment with the wishes and needs of the 37 consulting Tribal Nations and descendants harmed by Pipestone Indian Boarding School. Feedback on the final draft version of the plan will continue through the spring of 2026, when this aspect of the Pipestone Indian Boarding School project is scheduled to be completed.

In addition to the messaging plan, our team is working to identify every child who was taken to Pipestone Indian Boarding School and to determine what Tribal Nation or community they were taken from. Many Indian boarding school records in NARA include a roster of every child that attended the school and their Tribal Nation of record. There is no such document for the school at Pipestone. Rosters from seven academic years in the 1920s were found and shared with our team by the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe Cultural Resources Office. These rosters, along with census records and information pulled from the digitized records in NIBSDA, are being used by our team to try to account for all the children taken to the school. This information will be

shared with Tribal Nations, who often ask us for a list of children from their Nation who were taken away to Pipestone Indian Boarding School, as descendants in their communities seek information about their relatives' experiences as part of their healing journey. This document was not part of our original research plan but was added later in response to THPO requests.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we detailed the history of the sacred pipestone quarries in southwest Minnesota and how an Indian boarding school came to be built there, against the wishes of the Ihanktonwan and other historically associated Tribal Nations. We discussed how Pipestone Indian Boarding School administrators ripped over 4,000 children away from their families, taken from at least 37 Tribal Nations, and brought them to the school where they were harshly treated. Attempts were made to strip them of their cultures and languages and forcefully assimilate them into White society as obedient, low-wage workers. We described our approach to digitizing, researching, and creating a messaging plan around the archival records from Pipestone Indian Boarding School that felt healing to descendants of survivors and reflected the goals and needs of consulting Tribal Nations. We shared five messaging themes formulated by the design team, developed based on feedback from descendants of Pipestone Indian Boarding School survivors. What we have not done is share stories from the archives here. Rather, we have emphasized that these stories belong to the survivors of Pipestone Indian Boarding School, their descendants, and the Tribal Nations and communities the children were taken from. The stories will be told by the 37 consulting Tribal Nations in the time and manner of their choosing.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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ENDNOTES

1. Michelle Night Pipe is a non-Native (settler) researcher and Mellon Humanities Post-Doctoral Fellow working on the Pipestone Indian Boarding School project (September 2023–May 2026). For more information see “Meet the Mellon Fellows: Dr. Michelle Night Pipe,” https://home.nps.gov/articles/000/mellon_pipe.htm.
2. See the speech by the founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, Captain R.H. Pratt, “The Advantages of Mingling Indians with Whites,” available at <https://upstanderproject.org/learn/guides-and-resources/first-light/pratts-speech>. See also Richard Henry Pratt, *Battlefield and Classroom: Four Decades with the American Indian, 1867–1904* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1964). For more on Native American boarding schools, see David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 23, 164; Julie Davis, “American Indian Boarding School Experiences: Recent Studies from Native Perspectives,” *OAH Magazine of History* 15:2 (2001): 20–22. Also see Department of the Interior, *Federal Indian Boarding School Investigative Reports*, Vols. 1 and 2. These reports are no longer available at doi.gov, but can be found at <https://boardingschoolhealing.org/federal-indian-boarding-school-initiative/> (accessed October 24, 2025).
3. NPS staff are not contributing authors to this article.
4. Calling children who were taken to Indian boarding schools “survivors” began in the early 2000s due to truth-telling and increased public acknowledgement of harms, coinciding with Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. See the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, <https://boardingschoolhealing.org/> (accessed September 10, 2025).
5. *Oceti Sakowin* translates to People of Seven Council Fires, known commonly but erroneously as the Sioux Nation. It includes the Wahpekute, Wahpetonwan, Sissetonwan, Mdewakanton, Ihanktonwan, Ihanktonwanna, and the Tetonwan groups of Dakota-, Nakota-, and Lakota-speaking people living on the upper Great Plains of the US.
6. “Unktehi and the Flood as Told by Lame Deer,” <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/unktehi-and-the-flood-as-told-by-lame-deer.htm> (accessed September 10, 2025).
7. Theodore Catton and Diane L. Krahe, *The Blood of the People: Historic Resource Study, Pipestone National Monument, Minnesota* (Washington, DC: National Park Service, US Department of the Interior, 2016), 15.
8. Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, Gary E. Moulton, and Thomas W. Dunlay (eds.), *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition: Comprehensive Index*, Vol. 13 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 168.
9. Treaty with the Yankton Sioux, 1858, Tribal Treaties Database, Oklahoma State University Libraries, <https://treaties.okstate.edu/treaties/treaty-with-the-yankton-sioux-1858-0776> (accessed September 10, 2025).
10. These oral histories are unpublished but discussed in Catton and Krahe (p. 244), who say that in one version, the Ihanktonwan chiefs were taken out in a boat and told they would be thrown overboard if they refused to sign.
11. Catton and Krahe, 279.
12. Catton and Krahe, 280.
13. In 1884, the Supreme Court ruled against the squatters, saying that “the whole of such land was by the treaty withdrawn from private entry or appropriation.” <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/111/347/> (accessed October 24, 2025).
14. Catton and Krahe, 285–286.
15. Cynthia Landrum, *The Dakota Sioux Experience at Flandreau and Pipestone Indian Schools* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 29–30. Landrum discusses how Carlisle was “the showpiece of Indian education” and served as the model for several decades. By 1899, there were 24 large industrial boarding schools in the US fashioned after Carlisle. Pipestone Indian Boarding School, like Carlisle and other schools, sold postcards to tourists and visitors (see Figure 1) to popularize their assimilation of Native students. Indian boarding schools were also popularized by their athletic teams. At Carlisle, the football team was renowned for their athleticism, skill, and the invention of the forward pass, which revolutionized college football.
16. *Pipestone County Star*, February 10, 1893, page 1.
17. Adam Fortunate Eagle, *Pipestone: My Life in an Indian Boarding School* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 6.
18. The quarriers Adam Fortunate Eagle encountered were three Dakota families: the Derbys, the Taylors, and the Bryans. Their descendants formed the Pipestone Dakota Community and many still live near Pipestone and work at the quarries today. Fortunate Eagle, 67–69.
19. Landrum, 135.
20. The General Allotment Act, also known as the Dawes Severalty Act, was passed in 1887 and attempted to assimilate Tribal Nations by separating Tribal lands into individual parcels, which was an attack on the communal existence of Native people. Unallotted Tribal land was declared surplus and opened to White settlement. By 1934, the act had reduced Tribal land holdings in the US by 60%. <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/nativevoices/timeline/373.html> (accessed October 24, 2025).
21. US Senate, “Title of Yankton Indians to the Pipestone Reservation in Minnesota,” 5. See also Catton and Krahe, 332.

22. Catton and Krahe, 331–332.
23. *Yankton Sioux Tribe of Indians v. United States*, 272 U.S. 351 (1926). <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/272/351/> (accessed September 12, 2025).
24. Only 111 tribal members out of 450, about one-fourth, signed the petition in support of the monument. Catton and Krahe, 337–339.
25. From 1937 until 1953, when Pipestone Indian Boarding School closed, the school superintendent also served as the park superintendent. Catton and Krahe, 333.
26. For information about the quarry permitting process at Pipestone National Monument see <https://www.nps.gov/pipe/learn/management/quarry-permits.htm> (accessed October 24, 2025).
27. “Consultation,” as defined by the National Park Service, is a formal, two-way, government-to-government dialogue where NPS engages with Tribal governments to ensure they have meaningful input on decisions that affect their lands, cultural resources, and communities. National Park Service, *Director’s Order #71C: Consultation with Indian and Alaska Native Tribes*; https://www.nps.gov/subjects/policy/upload/DO_71C_11-4-2024.pdf (amended March 3, 2025; accessed September 12, 2025). Tribal consultation can be a meaningful collaboration, but when done poorly or with bad intentions, it can be little more than informing Tribes about decisions already made. See Michael C. Blumm and Lizzy Pennock, “Tribal Consultation: Toward Meaningful Collaboration with the Federal Government,” *Colorado Environmental Law Journal* 33 (2022): 1–54.
28. Department of the Interior, *Federal Indian Boarding School Investigative Reports*, Vols. 1 and 2 (accessed October 24, 2025).
29. Our Best Practices and Methodologies statement is not available to the public but is summarized here. The best practices developed through this project intentionally deviate from and challenge traditional archival methodologies and are in conversation with efforts to apply more respectful protocols for stewarding Indigenous archival materials. See First Archivist Circle, “Protocols for Native American Archival Materials,” <https://www2.nau.edu/libnap-p/> (accessed October 24, 2025).
30. Catton and Krahe, 333.
31. For more, see NABS, “Healing Informed Resources for Self-Care,” <https://boardingschoolhealing.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Healing-informed-resources-for-self-care.pdf> (accessed October 24, 2025).
32. NABS, “Healing Informed Resources for Self-Care.”