

Last week, news broke of the 215 First Nations children found in a mass grave at the Kamloops Indian Residential school in western Canada. Ground-penetrating radar (GPR) located their mass grave, one into which the Roman Catholic Diocese of Kamloops had unceremoniously and ignominiously dropped these children. It has taken me several days to process this news, as it was just a few weeks ago I visited the Shawnee Indian Methodist Manual Labor School in Fairway, Kansas, where I encountered firsthand the legacy of these residential schools upon Shawnee children. As I walked the grounds of the Mission, I had a visceral and soul-wrenching experience, knowing what my ancestors very likely endured there.

Finding a mass grave of children is perhaps one of the worst things imaginable. That so many of these residential school graves were dug under order from religious leaders working in the name of the Church is the ultimate in heinous and execrable behavior.

Here in the United States, the Department of War ordered more than 10,000 children from over 140 Tribal Nations to attend Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania. Operating from 1879 until 1918, Carlisle was the model for twenty-six subsequent residential schools built by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. At least 186 known children are buried at Carlisle.

Long before Indigenous children were forced to attend either Kamloops or Carlisle, the US Civilization Fund Act of 1819—an act “making provision for the civilization of the Indian tribes adjoining the frontier settlements”—supported the Shawnee Indian Methodist Manual Labor School, which operated from 1839 to 1862.

The Methodists received 2000 acres of land from my people to build it. We were required to also purchase and prepay for the supplies of our own assimilation, from the labor to the bricks, mortar, lumber, nails, and even the tuition of our children. The school became the center of American power and control on our reservation. Even in its earliest years, Indian Agent Benjamin Newsom received reports of abuses against Shawnee children at the Mission. Two of our leaders, Joseph Parks and Graham Rogers, traveled to Washington, DC and submitted formal complaints on the condition of the children, stating that they were not properly clothed and fed. Visitors can still see the dormitories where Shawnee children were forced to sleep in windowless attics after full days of toiling in the Mission’s fields. The Reverend Thomas Johnson, the Methodist minister tasked with educating and keeping our children safe, died a very wealthy man having reaped the benefits of labor from both enslaved African Americans and Shawnee children.

In 1860, a Shawnee delegation again traveled to the capital and testified that the United States’ inaction had only further harmed the Shawnee Tribe and our children. Reports and testimony state that the children were ill and covered with lice, and at least one set of parents reported that they learned of the death of their children only upon visiting the school in person. Leaders of the Shawnee Indian Mission School had failed to notify the children’s families of their passing.

The absence of a cemetery at Shawnee Indian Mission makes my stomach turn with fear of what we may find.

We know that Shawnee children died while attending the Mission. I know that our dead children want to come home. To date, there have been no efforts to determine if our children are left among what remains of the Shawnee Indian Mission.

North of the Treaty Line, the Kamloops Diocese owes answers to our First Nations relatives, and perhaps the Methodists owe answers to the Shawnee as well. I assign no blame to any living person today, but I think this is the moment to demand accountability. I am hopeful that the relationship forged between my office and Fairway's Mayor Melanie Hepperly will allow for the Shawnee Tribe, Kansas state officials and the City of Fairway to perform a thorough GPR survey of the Mission's grounds to locate any of our children's graves so that we can bring them home.