

Minute of Support for Joint House and Senate Bill
"Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies in the U.S. Act"

For decades, including the decades of our own lifespan, Indian boarding schools and child welfare authorities have been removing indigenous children from their homes.

This speaks to Memphis Friends Meeting which sits on the Bell Route of the National Trail of Tears and on the land of the O-ga-xpa (Quapaw) and the Chickashsha (Chickasaw) peoples who were forcibly removed from West Tennessee to Oklahoma in 1838. It comes home to us as we learn that over 30 Indian boarding schools were run by Quakers.

In east Tennessee, Quakers' interest in educating Cherokee people began as early as 1877 when a Quaker, Dr. J. D. Garner of Maryville, TN, placed two young Cherokee men in school at Maryville. Garner was later appointed Superintendent of Schools for all Cherokees east of the Mississippi River by which time most were living in western North Carolina. We have found records that five day schools and two boarding schools run by Quakers were under contract with the U.S. Government and the Tribe between 1880 and 1892. Funds came from the contractors plus additional funding from North Carolina Yearly Meeting and Western Yearly Meeting (largely made up of Quakers who had emigrated from North Carolina to Indiana).

In 1885, the records quote the Quakers, "Our purpose has been so to reach and instruct the unsaved that they might accept Christ intelligently and those who already know of His love and mercy, the necessity that their lives should conform to their profession, and that the only true standard of right is found in God's word."

References to violent discipline or runaways are absent from these records; there is reason to assume that relations were amicable. Later, though, there was controversy and decline in relations surrounding a Superintendent named Henry Spray and the Quakers turned the control of the schools over to the Federal Government. Paula Palmer, a Boulder, CO, Quaker has done more extensive research on midwestern Quaker-run Indian boarding schools and their records of harm.

In a 2022 hearing before the House of Representatives, Mr. Matthew Warbonnet, age 76, testified about the eight years he attended St. Francis Boarding School 24/7 for ten months a year. His father had taught him a song which he sang each morning on waking. "When the dawn has arrived, I live again." It helped him survive. Many children did not survive.

We know from the Indian Boarding School Initiative Report released by Secretary Deb Haaland of the Department of the Interior that whatever the intention of assimilation policies, the schools, in reality, stole from these children their families, their culture, their languages, and their spiritual practices. It began with cutting their hair and giving them English names and led to human rights violations in the form of child labor, malnutrition, solitary confinement and sexual abuse. Approximately 19 Federal Indian boarding schools account for over 500 American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian child deaths. As far back as the presidency of George Washington, assimilation policies were strategically intertwined with government efforts to take away tribal land.

Memphis Friends Meeting acknowledges the sadness and the intergenerational trauma that continues to be passed down from these injustices. We acknowledge the complicity of the

Religious Society of Friends, including Quakers in Tennessee, in the harm done to Indigenous people. We support the passage of the joint House and Senate bill, “Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies in the U.S. Act” which would establish a formal commission to investigate and document policies and practices of over 365 federally sponsored, faith-run institutions from the 1860’s-1960’s. The time for this bill is now as elders who can tell their stories are aging. Although the wrongs committed in these institutions can never be made right, we can start the truth, healing and reconciliation process for the families and communities affected. We urge Friends to watch for this bill to be re-introduced in this 118th session of Congress. We urge Friends’ action on this bill and attention to issues and efforts that are important in the healing and repair of this painful history that we all share.

—Approved by Memphis Friends Meeting in
Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business
4/9/2023