

Close to Home - The Thomas Indian School: History of a Native American Residential Boarding School

by Joe Stahlman

During the American Revolution, the Seneca aided the British Empire. While the Seneca, like all nations in the Haudenosaunee, initially declined to participate in the conflict, eventually they chose to support the British. By 1779, this decision had devastating consequences. Following George Washington's orders, Major General John Sullivan and General James Clinton led an invasion of Haudenosaunee territory. American troops destroyed 40 towns and burned nearly 160,000 bushels of stored corn and that season's crop (Mt. Pleasant 2007). The Seneca and other Haudenosaunee had no winter stores, many towns were completely razed, and people were forced to relocate to Fort Niagara. That winter at Fort Niagara became known as "the great winter of suffering." Thousands died of exposure to the elements and starvation. In the spring of 1780, people moved away from the fort, reestablishing settlements and building new communities like Buffalo Creek.

In 1783, the British and the new Americans ended the war. Through an omission of their presence at Ghent, the Haudenosaunee were forced, separately and collectively, to sign treaties with the Americans at Fort Stanwix in 1784 (Hill and Parmenter 2018). During the following decade, Seneca and Haudenosaunee diplomats worked tirelessly to negotiate a meaningful treaty with the United States. Their efforts were rewarded in November 1794, when the Treaty at Canandaigua was signed, defining Seneca Territory as lands west of the Genesee River following the eastern shores of Lakes Erie and Ontario and returning east along the Pennsylvania state line. The 1794 treaty forever reserved the agreed-upon lands for the Seneca (Oberg 2016).

Although the Canandaigua Treaty promised to reserve Seneca lands, it also included provisions for the possible sale of lands with federal oversight and approval. In 1797, following unrelenting demands by American land speculators, the Nation's chiefs signed another treaty under duress at Big Tree. The Holland Land Company purchased the greater part of Seneca lands for \$100,000 along with annuity payments. The Seneca reserved 310 square miles of land, mostly already established settlements in the Genesee Valley, Buffalo Creek, Tonawanda, the Cattaraugus Creek, and Allegheny River regions. Pressure from land speculators continued for decades. Politicians and investors involved in the construction of the Erie Canal were eager to purchase more Seneca land. All across the growing U.S., a large number of private, state, and federal efforts were determined to extinguish title to Indigenous lands. One of the most notorious policies was Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Act of 1830.

The Buffalo Creek Treaty of 1838, negotiated by the Ogden Land Company, purchased the remaining Seneca reservations at Allegany, Buffalo Creek, Cattaraugus, and Tonawanda for \$202,000. Because of the treaty, 200 Seneca, along with people from other regional communities, immigrated to Kansas. A year later less than half the Seneca returned. They reported that approximately half those who accepted removal died in route. Those who stayed in Indian Territory eventually formed the Seneca-Cayuga community. Traumatized by the loss of life and

betrayed by all involved, the returning Seneca contested the 1838 Buffalo Creek Treaty with the support of Presbyterians Reverend Asher Wright and his wife Laura and Quakers like Philip E. Thomas (Mt. Pleasant 2007). Their investigation uncovered acts of bribery and fraud. The Seneca, attorneys, and their allies lobbied Congress for redress and a compromise treaty that was eventually negotiated in 1842, leaving the Seneca Nation of Indians in control of the Allegany and Cattaraugus Oil Springs Territories. The Seneca living on Tonawanda lobbied for the return of those lands (Hauptman 1986).

The Seneca continued to fight for the Buffalo Creek lands; however, City of Buffalo planners and the Ogden Land Company pressured them to release their claim to Buffalo Creek. Some Buffalo Creek communities migrated to the Six Nations Tract inside British Canada; most of the Buffalo Creek community chose the Cattaraugus Territory. Reverend and Mrs. Wright, who had operated a mission at Buffalo Creek since 1831, also transplanted to Cattaraugus (SNI Archives).

The Creation of a Seneca Education System

In late 1847, typhoid fever spread across Cattaraugus Territory and within six months, 70 Seneca died. The loss of life was devastating, leaving a high number of orphans without caregivers. Laura Wright and her niece Martha Hoyt cared for the orphaned children at the mission house. Laura Wright felt there was a need to aid nearly 50 children she deemed either “orphaned” or “destitute children.” The Wrights advocated for the children and the need to assist the Seneca community. Laura Wright collaborated with Seneca Nation Councilor Nathaniel J. Strong to create a resolution for the establishment of an orphan asylum for destitute orphan children (Quigley 2019; SNI Archives).

Seneca ally and Quaker Phillip E. Thomas donated \$100 to the school. Although not substantial, his contribution had a positive effect on the Board of Missions, who approved building an orphanage. Thomas also encouraged Reverend Asher Wright to personally lobby for the school. Wright found an ally in J.V.H. Clark, New York State (NYS) Assemblyman from Onondaga, Chairman of the Committee on Indian Affairs. In early 1855, the NYS Assembly passed an act incorporating the Thomas Asylum for Orphan and Destitute Children as a private institution receiving state aid. NYS appropriated \$2,000 for construction and maintenance of a suitable building on the Cattaraugus Territory. In another NYS resolution, the school was charged to receive “destitute” and “orphaned” children from territories across the state—Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk, Tuscarora, Poospatuck, Unkechaug, Shinnecock, and Abenaki. NYS regulated the school under the authority of the Department of Instruction with an allotment of \$10 for each child’s maintenance (SNI Archives).

In 1855, the Seneca Nation authorized the sale of 15 acres to the institution. In 1856, the NYS Legislature appropriated additional funds for building the asylum from the Federal Commissioner of Indian Affairs. Again, Thomas’ influence aided creation of the school. The Society of Friends held fundraisers in Buffalo to furnish the school and purchase a double wagon and three milk cows. By mid-1856, the children transferred from the old mission house into the new building. Not only did the children have a new home, but also now they were pressured to practice introduced cultural behaviors. The school’s Board of Trustees passed a resolution requiring English only (SNI Archives).

The first 20 years of the asylum provided the “inmates,” a term often applied to the children, with the foundations of elementary education. A report from 1860 states the children were plainly clad and furnished with “cheap but wholesome food.” Each day was divided between menial tasks and basic literacy. Boys’ education revolved around manual labor, including agriculture, wood chopping, stump pulling, and cow milking; girls’ education revolved around domestic work to run “civilized households,” including cleaning, food service, and child care. At 16, young men were employed as farm labor and young women as domestics in nearby non-Native communities. A typical day at the institution:

[r]ising bell at 5 am; followed by chores and morning worship at 6 am; more chores until 9 am followed by the noon dinner; school and then more chores in the afternoon; followed by evening chores and supper at 6 pm and evening worship at 7. At 8 o’clock the younger children go to bed while the older children are taught instrumental music and singing; books are read to them and on Friday night there is a special feature—the Band of Hope, a temperance organization composed of all of the older children meets. Saturday morning, after chores are done, work classes are conducted for the boys on the farm or shop and the girls in the sewing room. Saturday afternoon was devoted to the weekly bath and recreation. On Sunday—according to the laws of the Christian Sabbath—they rested, attended Sunday school, listened to sermons and attended worship service. (Quigley 2019,51)

It did not leave room for much else.

By the 1870s, the Thomas Asylum’s primary focus was manual labor. William P. Letchworth, Vice President of the State Board of Charities, stated, “The importance of inculcating habits of industry is fully recognized, and forms the principle feature of asylum training” (1876). In the same year, Lewis Seneca, President of the Board of Managers, reported that the workforce at the school consisted of nine people: the superintendent, matron, assistant matron, seamstress, housekeeper, assistant laundress, general assistant, a seasonal farmhand, and a supervisor to oversee the broom shop where the boys made brooms in the winter. Seneca noted the children performed most of the intense work at the asylum. The Thomas Asylum practiced child labor until the early decades of the 20th century, when it transitioned into an academic institution. In 1946, the federal Director of Indian Education Willard Beatty (1940) noted his surprise by the continued use of child labor.

New York State Control

In 1874, when enrollment rose to 104 and three-quarters of operating funds came from New York State, the asylum faced a major challenge. A new state constitution amendment prohibited public funding for corporations, associations, or private undertakings. Letchworth appealed to Senator Daniel P. Wood to hold hearings on fixing this problem. Upon the pleas from Reverend Asher Wright, the legislature transferred ownership of the asylum to the state. As a result, residents became subject to supervision and control by the State Board of Charities. Through an act of a pen, Seneca people lost the right to care for their children (The State Board of Charities 1876). The school’s 1875 charter indicates its purpose was to furnish resident Indigenous children with “care, moral training and education, and instruction in husbandry and the arts of civilization” (Quigley

2019, 55). This directly paralleled the federal Indian boarding school legislation, which also espoused assimilation and removal of children from their homes and communities. Institutionalized education stripped children of a holistic, well-rounded upbringing, while families mourned the loss of their children. Many times, parents did not completely understand what was happening. The parents did not always fill out the application for their children; often staff did it for families. The school kept track of all the students' money. Parents regularly had to petition the institution for their child's allowance to purchase school uniforms. Instances of financial abuse were evidenced by the continued control of former students' annuities even after they graduated.

By 1905, a combination of better health care, new buildings and dormitories, improved sanitation, and an improved diet contributed to the overall health of the student body. However, the school's ledgers note a monotonous diet until the school shuttered its doors. Mary Pembleton, a student who spent her early years in the 1920s at the Thomas Indian School, recollected that the food "just wasn't good to eat. The oatmeal was wormy, the salt pork was cooked and served in its own grease and the beans and potatoes weren't done." Calvin Kettle, who lived there in the late 1930s, recalled that "at night after milking, we separated the cream from the milk. The whole milk went to the employees and teachers, the skim milk went to us kids" (Quigley 2019, 55). Lori Quigley notes how the diet was rarely attributed to the sicknesses children acquired. John H. Van Valkenburg, the school's superintendent from 1881 to 1892, blamed the children's ill health on their genetics: "We do not find in the youth of this race, at present time, the strong physical development that enables them to battle against disease and endure hardships but rather [a] weakened constitution, in which hereditary seeds of decay have been handed down" (Quigley 2019, 55).

Abuse and Negligence

Van Valkenburg was the first to publish formal superintendents' reports. These reports contain moral allusions and provide important insight into his beliefs about the students at Thomas Indian School:

The old sloth, improvidence, and passion for a wild life still dominate [the children's] nature (The State Board of Charities 1900);

I have become fully convinced that the means of education and improvement will never be productive of the highest good as long as [the children's] tribal relations continued (The State Board of Charities 1903); and

...too much importance cannot be attached to the industrial training of Indian children, as they cannot hope to become valuable members of any community or hope to do away with their inherited shiftlessness." (State Board of Charities 1905)

Shortly after Van Valkenburg's tenure as superintendent, a scandal broke out. There were allegations that Van Valkenburg committed offenses ranging from illicit relations with young female students to mishandled finances. The Board of Charities investigated, and much of their proceedings were published verbatim in *The Buffalo Enquirer*. The newspaper coverage highlighted careless oversight and suggested the Board of Trustees was guilty of negligence. Headlines were sensational: "Simply Awful: Poor Indian Orphan Girls Beaten, Starved, and Horribly Ill-Treated." Newspapers also produced signed affidavits and sworn testimony from staff and children acting as witnesses for the prosecution. As witness testimonies piled up, Van

Valkenburg was located and arrested in Brockport, NY. None of that mattered, the very next day, he pleaded innocent and was released from jail (*The Buffalo Enquirer*).

Oscar Craig, President of the State Board of Charities, wrote to Attorney General Simon N. Rosendale about reports of negligence in respect to finances and supervision and that “the most grave charges made against the late superintendent allege illicit relations with girls under the age of sixteen at his institution.” The evidence uncovered painted a terrifying picture of Van Valkenburg’s treatment of the Indigenous children under his care. Newspapers continued running sensationally titled stories that printed testimonies of the substandard and, at times, rotten food as well as torturous acts, such as cold-water baths, solitary confinement, and whippings. Van Valkenburg was admitted to the Buffalo State Hospital because a Dr. Mann of Brockport judged him insane. After a lengthy investigation and thousands of pages of testimony, the case was eventually closed by mid-March 1893. After an hour of deliberation, the Commissioners of the State Board of Charities announced that due to his insanity diagnosis it was useless to continue the inquiry. The committee issued its final report to the State Board of Charities in 1893, concluding:

Material found and substantial evidence has been received on the part of the people to prove the charges in the case of [the major complainant], and other similar charges, and other improper conduct, of the late superintendent toward female inmates, and to sustain complaints of improper and insufficient food, of undue severity, of cruelty in punishment and disciplining, and in other matters... (1893)

Van Valkenburg was never brought to trial.

The impact of the scandal was enormous. The entire Board of Trustees was dismissed, and a new board appointed. The next two succeeding superintendents found themselves in similar scandals, which embarrassed New York. The State poured additional funding into a rebuilding program. In its 1900 Annual Report, the State Board of Charities wrote:

[t]he buildings of the Thomas Asylum, the education and training the institution affords have led to a greatly improved condition, morally, mentally and physically, of the children, and the asylum, through its relation with the different reservations, is quietly exerting a beneficial influence upon the adult Indians, especially upon those of the Cattaraugus reservation, upon which the asylum is located. (1900)

In 1895, NYS appointed George I. Lincoln head of the institution. During his tenure, capital improvements flourished, with the entire campus being rebuilt by 1905, in time for the school’s 50th anniversary. Immediately, Lincoln started a kindergarten and by 1899 the school held its first 6th-grade commencement. In 1905, 7th and 8th grades were added, and Lincoln received legislative approval to change the school’s name to Thomas Indian School. Athletics were incorporated into the curriculum. On paper, Thomas looked greatly improved. Warren R. Gratwick (1904), of the State Board of Charities, observed “...a liberal education is offered to the Indian children who are fortunate enough to be taken under the care of the state in this institution.” While the educational components may have expanded, Gratwick’s papers also mentioned a combined manual labor and education program; boys and girls performed the same gendered practices as before. In 1907, Lincoln died, and the head teacher, John C. Brennan, became superintendent. Until his death in 1943, Brennan maintained Lincoln’s philosophical approach in running the school (Quigley 2019).

Hardliner Hjalimar Scoe followed Brennan, who instilled assimilationist practices that included punishments for children speaking their Native languages. In 1946, Willard Beatty, Director of Indian Education, toured the school and reported his surprise “to find metal barriers in the windows which would effectively preclude their use as exits in the event of fire, and despite the superintendent’s explanation that this was to prevent the youngsters from getting out at night, seems an unnecessary precaution in view of the fact that the Indian Service operates more than sixty boarding schools in none of which we have found it necessary to bar the windows” (1940). Beatty also observed that Scoe, through his restrictions, treated the children as though they were delinquents.

Conclusion

In 1956, Governor Averell Harriman announced the closing of the Thomas Indian School. The governor stated that the action was based on “the culmination of a program of integration through which Indian children are now being reared and educated in the community like all other children by sending them to regular public schools and placing them in family boarding homes and childcare institutions” (Hauptman 1986). This rationale for closing the school ironically mirrored the same philosophy of assimilation of Native children into the dominant society. Many former students entered the military, transferred to other U.S. government residential boarding schools for Indigenous children, or were employed as housekeepers in non-Native homes. For many of these young women, working in a wage home became their first experience living with a family apart from the institution. Most of the institution’s buildings were eventually taken down by the Seneca Nation. Today, only a few remain and were repurposed by the Seneca Nation government. The former grounds serve as the Cattaraugus campus for Seneca Nation: government buildings, a senior citizen residential home, an early childhood center, an Indian health services clinic, and a tribal library. The former infirmary is now a courthouse.

Thomas Indian School embodied both discrimination of and agency for Seneca people. There exists a diversity of experiences, attitudes, and feelings from those who attended the institution. Some claimed that the school equipped them with important skills and training to succeed in the outside world, whereas documented evidence demonstrates that others were physically and sexually abused. For descendants of the boarding school residents, remnants of multigenerational trauma are often expressed as alcohol and drug abuse, depression, and other post-traumatic stress disorder manifestations. Native communities and families touched by the residential boarding school era have been on a path toward healing. For some, they regained lost family. For others, they lost family. And many seek answers why. For others, they want to ensure it will never happen again. In Canada, First Nations peoples pursued legal action and reparations on behalf of those abused at residential schools. In the U.S., Indigenous communities are beginning to address this ongoing trauma. Awareness continues to build. We have seen an increase of films portraying the struggles of children, families, and communities in this system. Communities have started their own unique healing process that allows them to begin each day with a Good Mind*.

*“The Haudenosaunee believe peace is a state of mind obtained through a strong connection to spirit. Our Elders teach us that practicing the Good Mind will cause our spirit to grow, known as Orenda. Good Minds have strong Orenda which leads to Peace.” (From <https://ganondagan.org/learn/good-mind#>)

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