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# 'Their spirits are still here': Tribe, state to search for remains at North Dakota boarding school

The Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa and the State Historical Society of North Dakota recently agreed to partner in a search for the remains of children around the former Fort Totten Indian Industrial School, which lies on the Spirit Lake Reservation in the northeastern part of the state.



Denise Lajimodiere, author of a leading book on Native American boarding schools, uses old photos possibly depicting the graves of soldiers to orient herself in a forested area near the Fort Totten State Historic Site, which formerly served as a boarding school for Native American youth. Lajimodiere believes the bodies of former students may be buried near the former school on the Spirit Lake Reservation in northeast North Dakota.

Dave Samson / The Forum

By [Michelle Griffith](#), Jeremy Turley

July 08, 2022 04:35 AM

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*Editor's note: This is the fifth story in an occasional series on Native American boarding schools and their impact on the region's tribes.*

FORT TOTTEN, N.D. — On a cloudy October morning, Denise Lajimodiere walked through brambles and tall grass with her eyes to the ground.

Consulting a photo from the 1980s, the scholar scanned the prairie terrain near the Fort Totten State Historic Site for small, tan boulders that could mark graves long hidden from view.

After stumbling across one, she grabbed a plastic baggie of tobacco from her coat pocket, held a pinch tight in her left fist and said a prayer for the bodies that may have been buried under her feet more than a century ago.

Historic site employees believe the boulders could be the vestiges of a cemetery for U.S. soldiers buried in the mid-1800s. Lajimodiere thinks the gravesite may also contain the remains of Native American children who died while attending a boarding school at the former military post.

“We know their spirits are still here,” Lajimodiere said solemnly while walking the site on the Spirit Lake Reservation in northeast North Dakota.

Following [last year's discovery](https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-kamloops-residential-school-unmarked-graves-discovery-update/) of graves likely belonging to Indigenous children who attended Canadian boarding schools, the United States has begun to reckon with the idea that the remains of students could be buried in unmarked graves near former American boarding schools.

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May 16, 2022 10:30 AM

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Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Chairman Jamie Azure is almost certain that's the case at Fort Totten.

Azure has heard dozens of stories about children from his tribe who died or disappeared under uncertain circumstances at boarding schools like Fort Totten. He hopes an investigation into the site will bring closure for families still looking for answers generations later.

The Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa and the State Historical Society of North Dakota recently agreed to partner in a search for the remains of former Fort Totten students. Spirit Lake Chairman Doug Yankton said he welcomes the investigation on his tribe's land.

“Everything just adds up in my mind that we will find unmarked graves, and we will find tribal members,” Azure said.

## Searching for Graves in Fort Totten

The U.S. Department of the Interior [released a report in May](https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/bsi_investigative_report_may_2022_508.pdf) that identified 408 federal boarding schools and examined the government's role in forcibly taking Native American children away from their families to boarding schools aimed at assimilating them into white culture.

The department's investigation found "marked or unmarked burial sites" at 53 boarding school sites but did not disclose their locations to prevent grave robbing. The agency expects to find more burial sites at boarding schools as its investigation continues.

Lajimodiere, an enrolled Turtle Mountain citizen whose father and grandfather attended Fort Totten, found evidence that at least 13 Native American boarding schools existed in North Dakota.

Religious orders including the Catholic Church ran some of the schools, but the federal government operated Fort Totten and a handful of other institutions.

Fort Totten was by far the largest in the state, and at its peak enrollment of more than 500 students in the 1910s, was one of the biggest on-reservation schools in the country.

Interviews, internal documents and [Lajimodiere's findings](https://library.ndsu.edu/ndsarchives/recent-news/new-ndsu-press-book-stringing-rosaries-added-collection) reveal Fort Totten was a school with a culture of systemic abuse and neglect of children, but no direct evidence has been found to suggest students who died at the school were buried on or near the property.

If the search locates graves at the site and identifies the remains as former students, it may allow the tribe to give its members the proper burials they were denied so long ago, Azure said.

“The end goal is just to make sure that if we have any Turtle Mountain members that have been lost along the way, we make damn sure that we’re able to bring them home in a cultural and traditional and respectful manner,” Azure said.

Author and scholar Denise Lajimodiere looks at the remnants of a building that housed one of her relatives at the former Fort Totten Indian Industrial School on Oct. 27, 2021. The Native American boarding school operated from 1891 to 1959 before the state of North Dakota turned it into a historic site.

Dave Samson / The Forum

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## **From elimination to assimilation**

For longer than North Dakota has been a state, 16 brick buildings have stood in a neat rectangle not far from the southern shores of Devils Lake.

To some, the enduring structures at the [Fort Totten State Historic Site](https://www.history.nd.gov/historicsites/totten/tottenhistory.html) (<https://www.history.nd.gov/historicsites/totten/tottenhistory.html>) represent the proud legacy of the nation's military and the region's early frontier settlers.

But for many Native Americans with roots in the upper Midwest, Fort Totten serves as a physical reminder of the abuse they and their ancestors endured as children.

American soldiers founded the outpost in 1867 — the same year Sisseton and Wahpeton Sioux leaders signed a treaty establishing the Fort Totten Indian Reservation (later renamed the Spirit Lake Dakota Reservation). A flood of white settlers in the 1800s [forced the two Sioux bands](https://www.indianaffairs.nd.gov/sites/www/files/documents/pdfs/History_and_Culture_Spirit_Lake.pdf) ([https://www.indianaffairs.nd.gov/sites/www/files/documents/pdfs/History\\_and\\_Culture\\_Spirit\\_Lake.pdf](https://www.indianaffairs.nd.gov/sites/www/files/documents/pdfs/History_and_Culture_Spirit_Lake.pdf)) from their ancestral homelands in modern-day Minnesota.

The federal government tasked the troops stationed at the fort with settling and policing the reservation and protecting travel and trade routes, according to [historian Michael McCormack](https://www.grandforksherald.com/lifestyle/arts-entertainment/second-edition-published-of-book-on-fort-totten). (<https://www.grandforksherald.com/lifestyle/arts-entertainment/second-edition-published-of-book-on-fort-totten>)

At the time, officials in Washington including President Ulysses S. Grant had begun to shift their strategy on Native Americans from elimination to assimilation — a mission that had to start with the youngest generation.

The reservation's federal Indian agent, William Forbes, recruited the Grey Nuns, an order of Catholic sisters from Montreal, to run a “manual labor school,” historian James Carroll writes in the book “Fort Totten Military Post and Indian School.”

The institution opened in 1874, and had more than 50 Sioux students by the end of the school year. In addition to hard labor, the curriculum included some basic academic and religious instruction — a

combination that aligned with the U.S. Office of Indian Affairs' philosophy for "civilizing" Native American children, Carroll writes.

On New Year's Eve of 1890, the military turned over Fort Totten to the Office of Indian Affairs for the purpose of creating an on-reservation Native American boarding school in the image of [Carlisle Indian Industrial School](https://www.inforum.com/news/north-dakota/boys-remains-could-come-back-to-the-dakotas-from-notorious-native-american-boarding-school)(<https://www.inforum.com/news/north-dakota/boys-remains-could-come-back-to-the-dakotas-from-notorious-native-american-boarding-school>) in Pennsylvania — an institution that aimed to strip Native Americans of their language, culture and family ties.

The Fort Totten Indian Industrial School opened at the former military outpost on Jan. 19, 1891, under Superintendent William Canfield's leadership.

Female students at Fort Totten Indian Industrial School pose for a photo sometime between 1890 and 1901.

State Historical Society of North Dakota photo

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Indian Affairs officials allowed the Grey Nuns to continue teaching as a semi-autonomous department within the federally run school in what Carroll describes as "an unusual arrangement."



Federal Indian agents withheld rations and financial aid from parents who didn't willingly enroll their children at the school, Carroll writes.

Most members of the local Devils Lake Sioux Tribe (now the Spirit Lake Tribe) preferred to send their children to the Grey Nun department and rejected the fort school, Carroll writes. The majority of the students at the fort school in the first 20 years came from the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa's reservation, which lies about 70 miles to the northwest.

Canfield's 11 years at the helm of the school were marked by staff brutality, rampant disease, frequent runaways and excessive manual workloads.

And while it remains a mystery whether children were buried on or near the site of the school, there is no doubt students died while attending Fort Totten.

School officials reported three to five student deaths each year between 1891 and 1902, with causes including measles, meningitis and smallpox, according to Carroll and contemporary sanitary records. The whole reservation suffered from high mortality rates at the time, but the deaths at the school gave many parents a reason to keep their children from attending.

In a 1900 meeting with a federal boarding school supervisor, adults from the reservation reported appalling abuses inflicted on Fort Totten students by Canfield's administration.

Children were mercilessly whipped, denied meals for days, handcuffed or put in straightjackets for tardiness and other minor rule violations, according to meeting records. An observer also referred to the Grey Nuns as being overly strict and "using a wooden snap to give signals," Carroll writes.

Though a school in name, Fort Totten under Canfield more closely resembled a work camp for Native American youth. Reservation residents complained that the backbreaking labor of carrying rocks,

cutting ice and chopping wood came with no educational value and risked harming the children.

Students frequently ran away — a commonality shared with boarding schools across the country — and two boys drowned in Devils Lake while fleeing Fort Totten, Carroll writes.

Federal officials stood by Canfield despite finding evidence of abuse. The superintendent didn't lose his job until 1902 when he attempted to install his wife as the school's head matron, an act of nepotism that upset other staff.

Adolescents sit for a photograph at the Fort Totten Indian Industrial School in 1926.  
State Historical Society of North Dakota photo

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Under the direction of a replacement superintendent, Fort Totten became the largest on-reservation boarding school in the country with more than 340 students, Carroll writes.

A local Indian agent reported that the condition of the school had greatly improved after Canfield departed, but students still suffered through measles outbreaks from 1904 to 1906.

Amid financial difficulties, school officials looked to increase enrollment, which brought in higher federal allocations and more children to work manual labor jobs that sustained the institution.

By 1917, more than 530 students mostly from the Dakotas and Montana attended the school. The extremely tight living quarters had a negative impact on the students' health, Carroll writes.

The school temporarily shut down from 1917 to 1919 due to money troubles, but a few years after it reopened, national curriculum changes put a greater emphasis on classroom and vocational learning.

A 1928 federal report brought to light the major deficiencies of Native American boarding schools, and eventually led to the shuttering of the fort school in 1935. For the next five years, the site became a sanatorium for children with tuberculosis.

Many of the students transferred to day schools or the Grey Nuns' Little Flower boarding school, which opened several miles from the fort in St. Michael in 1929. Former students of the Catholic institution recall that the nuns were mean and abusive to students.

Alvina Alberts, who attended the school from the age of 5, said in a [1993 interview with University of Mary](https://www.worldcat.org/title/state-historical-society-of-north-dakota-education-and-interpretation-division-indian-boarding-schools-oral-history-interviews-1993/oclc/707728467&referer=brief_results)([https://www.worldcat.org/title/state-historical-society-of-north-dakota-education-and-interpretation-division-indian-boarding-schools-oral-history-interviews-1993/oclc/707728467&referer=brief\\_results](https://www.worldcat.org/title/state-historical-society-of-north-dakota-education-and-interpretation-division-indian-boarding-schools-oral-history-interviews-1993/oclc/707728467&referer=brief_results)) researchers that the nuns hit students with the sharp-edge of a ruler, adding "I had broken bones in my hands that I didn't know about until I was in my 50s."

The fort later became a day and boarding school for Native American children in 1940. By then, the curriculum reflected that of most public schools in the state, Carroll writes. The school closed for good in 1959, and the federal government turned over the site to the state.

Today at the Fort Totten State Historic Site, tourists can take self-guided tours through some of the old buildings and buy souvenirs at a

gift shop.

By far the most well-maintained buildings are a prairie-themed bed and breakfast and a memorial-like museum dedicated to the Lake Region Pioneer Daughters.

A handful of display boards and plaques describe the Native American boarding school that once operated at the fort, but the site's military history is presented as the main attraction.

## **'I will not talk in school'**

When Ramona Klein, 74, thinks back on her time attending Fort Totten from 1954 to 1958, two feelings stick out in her mind: loneliness and hunger.

Klein, when she was about 5 years old, lived in a two-bedroom home without electricity in Belcourt on the Turtle Mountain Reservation. Neither of her parents had a steady income, and Klein remembers her belly was constantly empty.

Then in 1954, she was sent to Fort Totten along with five of her siblings.

Klein's not sure if her parents were coerced into having their children attend boarding school or if it was her parents' last-ditch effort to care for them. She also doesn't know whether they were aware of Fort Totten's poor reputation.

"I don't really know if I could say it was a choice for us to go to boarding school in that way. It wasn't my choice. I was a child," Klein said. "But even for my parents, is it really a choice if your kids are going to starve and freeze?"

Klein left her Belcourt home for the first time in her life when she was 6 years old. She and five of her siblings boarded a green school bus and journeyed southeast to Fort Totten.

"All the buildings seemed so big and strange," Klein recalled.

The children were brought into a room where the girls were given new clothes. A matron cut off her long black hair, making it into a bowl-like cut. Klein recalls being led in a line — the mandatory formation for the children to go from building to building — and walking across the military square to the girl's dormitory.

Looking out the window from her dormitory, she remembers yearning to see her parents walking toward the school to bring her home.

“I would say, ‘Maybe tomorrow.’ There was always, always that longing,” she said.

Ramona Klein (right) stands with her brothers Earl (left) and Damian (back) at the Fort Totten boarding school in approximately 1956. Six of the eight children in Klein's family attended the school on the Spirit Lake Reservation in northeast North Dakota.

Submitted photo

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Klein recalls her education being almost nonexistent. She doesn't remember the subjects that were taught, only the punishments she received.

She recalled multiple occasions when she had to write the phrase “I will not talk in school” 1,500 times in a row for talking out of turn in class.

Whenever students misbehaved or took food from the kitchens because of hunger, staff beat the children with a wooden paddle crudely named “the board of education,” she said.

Klein now has a doctorate in educational leadership and has worked across all 50 states. She often talks about Fort Totten, recalling how her time there more than 65 years ago affects her life today. She still has flashbacks after she speaks about her boarding school experience.

Her knees are stiff and ache occasionally, which she believes stems from being forced to kneel on a broomstick handle whenever she spoke out of turn or misbehaved.

An aerial photograph from the mid-1950s shows Fort Totten.  
State Historical Society of North Dakota photo

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Klein is used to getting incredulous looks when she tells people about her experiences as a child. She said many believe that those who

attended Native American boarding schools died long ago.

“People tend to think that those of us who experienced it are not living, but it’s living history,” Klein said.

## The search for closure

The tribal and state officials committed to searching the area around the fort for possible gravesites understand it’s a long and expensive process with little precedent in North Dakota.

The state Historical Society approached Turtle Mountain about inspecting the site for unmarked graves within the last two months, and the search remains in its nascent stages.

Andy Clark, the Historical Society’s archaeology and historic preservation director, said the investigation of the Fort Totten site will loosely follow a model set at Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia, Canada, where [an anthropologist discovered about 200 potential graves.](#)

(<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-kamloops-residential-school-unmarked-graves-discovery-update/>)

State researchers and archaeologists must first narrow down the vast area around the fort, Clark said.

This preliminary step will lean on old maps and documents and the oral histories compiled by Lajimodiere to pinpoint the most likely locations for burial sites, Clark said.



Author and scholar Denise Lajimodiere uncovers a rock she believes could mark the burial places of children who died while attending the Fort Totten Indian Industrial School on the Spirit Lake Reservation in northeast North Dakota.

Dave Samson / The Forum

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Historical aerial photos give archaeologists a chance to see what the ground looked like decades ago — potentially as far back as the 1930s. Observing how land use has changed over time allows them to see areas where humans may have disturbed the earth.

Clark said archaeologists will then use “non-destructive methods” like drones to capture high-resolution images of the land that might reveal any “anomalies,” including depressions in the ground.

If the drone shots reveal areas worthy of further investigation, the next steps would be performing surveys at ground level and attempting to recover any remains, though Clark expects there would have to be extensive discussions before shovels hit dirt due to the “sensitive nature” of excavation.

Identifying any remains would be another major challenge, Azure said.

For now, the state will handle the costs associated with the investigation, said Historical Society Director Bill Peterson.

Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Chairman Jamie Azure sits at his desk on Oct. 22, 2021.  
Jeremy Turley / Forum News Service

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Azure said he plans to reach out to North Dakota's congressional delegation about the federal government taking on some of the financial burden of the investigation and any possible repatriations, but he said the tribe won't "be held up with bureaucracy" if it doesn't find willing partners in Washington.

Turtle Mountain and the Historical Society have recently begun discussing timelines for completing steps of the investigation, but they have not yet established a firm schedule, Clark said.

Azure said the tribe is in a strange position where it hopes to find no unmarked graves near Fort Totten, but it wants to bring a feeling of finality to families with relatives who never came home from boarding school.

If the tribe does locate the remains of Turtle Mountain children as Azure expects, the chairman said he wants to bring them back to the reservation and give them a traditional burial with a spirit fire that would allow them to “go onto that next level in their journey.”

“A lot of these children were not given that opportunity to go onto that next level, so it’s not only the families getting closure, but it’s the Turtle Mountain members who are lost that need to be brought back,” Azure said.

### **About the “Buried wounds” series**

In May 2021, an anthropologist discovered unmarked graves likely belonging to 200 children on the grounds of the Kamloops Indian Residential School in Canada. This disturbing finding drew attention to the United States’ role in forcibly assimilating thousands of Indigenous children through its own boarding school policies.

From 1819 and through the 1960s, the U.S. government oversaw policies for more than 400 American Indian boarding schools across the nation, including at least 13 in North Dakota. Many of the children who attended schools in North Dakota and elsewhere were taken from their

homes against their will, stripped of their culture and abused physically, sexually and psychologically.

Little research has been done on exactly how many schools existed in the U.S. and the extent to which the federal government knew about the conditions of each school. The U.S. Department of the Interior under Secretary Deb Haaland is investigating the history and legacy of federally run boarding schools.

The Forum has launched its own investigation into boarding schools in North Dakota and other parts of the country by interviewing survivors, reviewing public records and exploring the impact these schools still have on North Dakota's Indigenous population today.

The first installment in the series about the Sisseton and Wahpeton children who died at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School [can be found here.\(https://www.inforum.com/news/north-dakota/boys-remains-could-come-back-to-the-dakotas-from-notorious-native-american-boarding-school\)](https://www.inforum.com/news/north-dakota/boys-remains-could-come-back-to-the-dakotas-from-notorious-native-american-boarding-school)

The second installment about the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara children who died at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School [can be found here.\(https://www.inforum.com/news/north-dakota/my-heart-feels-so-heavy-young-men-from-western-north-dakota-tribe-never-came-back-from-boarding-school\)](https://www.inforum.com/news/north-dakota/my-heart-feels-so-heavy-young-men-from-western-north-dakota-tribe-never-came-back-from-boarding-school)

The third installment about Christian denominations reckoning with their role in Native American boarding schools [can be found here. \(https://www.inforum.com/news/north-dakota/local-faith-leaders-look-to-reckon-with-dark-legacy-of-native-american-boarding-schools\)](https://www.inforum.com/news/north-dakota/local-faith-leaders-look-to-reckon-with-dark-legacy-of-native-american-boarding-schools)

The fourth installment about delays in repatriating the remains of two Sisseton and Wahpeton boys from the former Carlisle Indian Industrial School [can be found here.\(https://www.inforum.com/news/north-dakota/army-boys-remains-wont-return-to-dakotas-from-notorious-native-american-boarding-school-this-year\)](https://www.inforum.com/news/north-dakota/army-boys-remains-wont-return-to-dakotas-from-notorious-native-american-boarding-school-this-year)

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