

*Piecing Together the Past:
Finding Student Stories in the Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center*

Submitted by Carolyn Brunell, Teacher at Westover, Middlebury, CT

Overview

In 1879, Carlisle Indian Industrial School was established under the authority of the U.S. federal government as the first of the many off-reservation boarding schools that would compel the enrollment of tens of thousands of Indian children over the following decades. Ostensibly designed to improve Indian lives by ‘civilizing’ students and assimilating them into white American culture, these schools in reality represented a violent rending of Indian cultures, communities and families in a process whose repercussions are still being lived by native peoples today.

This lesson is designed as part of an 11th-12th grade course tracing American Indian history from the Precontact period until the present. It asks students to grapple with the question of the forms in which we preserve historical memory. In this lesson, each student will investigate the file of a single student from the records of the school preserved by the Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center. Taking on the role of a historian, she will work to piece together multiple types of documents to reconstruct the stories her file reveals as well as those it might conceal.

Activities

Day 1: A New Approach to the ‘Indian Problem’?

For homework, students read Captain Richard H. Pratt’s speech, [“Kill the Indian and Save the Man”](#) and take notes on 1) how Pratt defines the ‘Indian problem’ and 2) what he sees as the solution. In class, the teacher should lead a close reading of the speech and ask students to reflect on whether Pratt represents an important shift in the government approach to its relationship with Indian peoples or instead should be viewed as continuing the essentials of earlier policies.

In the second half of class, students should use the lesson [“Exploring Before and After Photographs”](#) from the Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center to examine the ways in which Pratt attempted to sell the school’s mission to white Americans.

Day 2: The Boarding School Experience

For homework, students read Chapters 1-5 of Zitkala Sa, [“The School Days of an Indian Girl.”](#) To begin class, the teacher should lead a discussion of Sa’s experiences, focusing on the ways in which boarding school represented a sensory and emotional transformation in Sa’s life.

During the second half of class, the teacher should introduce the class to the process of reading student files using the Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center [Close Reading Teaching Module](#). Ask students about the kinds of information preserved in student files, and what impressions the files give of student experiences. For what purposes might the school want to create and preserve student files?

[To extend the lesson, students could read the beginning of [Mustapha Marrouchi's "Of Algeria: Childhood and Fear"](#) and compare Arrouj's experience of French education in colonial Algeria with Zitkala Sa's boarding school experience, considering the government's implied goals and the student's experience in each text. This should lead to a larger discussion of the use of education as a colonial tool and should help students think beyond the idea that Pratt 'meant well' to a more systemic understanding of colonialism and assimilation.]

For homework, students reflect in writing on how and why Zitkala Sa's memoir and the student files we examined present the boarding school experience.

Day 3: Piecing Together the Past

The teacher should begin class by inviting students to reflect together on the contrasts between Zitkala Sa's memoir and the Carlisle student files, drawing out student observations about the nature of different kinds of historical sources and perspectives.

Next, students watch the trailer for [The Lost Ones](#) documentary. Afterward, the teacher leads a discussion of the process of piecing together the stories of Jack, Kaseeta and Richard. What kind of sources did researchers use to uncover their story? What kinds of discoveries did they make, and how did those discoveries lead to other discoveries? How smooth was the research process? What questions were they able to answer, and what mysteries still remain? What other sources do we wish were available to answer our questions? How can we compare the goals and perspectives of the researchers and the students' Lipan Apache family?

Finally, the teacher should introduce the project by telling students that they will now be acting as researchers and historians to piece together the story of another student from Carlisle. Ask students to choose a girl to research from the list below and do an initial reading of her file on the [Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center](#) for homework.

[Note: If additional files or a mix of male and female students are desired, other students can be identified by using the [advanced student file search](#) to sort files in descending order by number of types of documents.]

Carlisle Indian School Students and Their Nations:

[Elizabeth Fish](#) (Menominee)

[Nora McFarland](#) (Nez Perce)

[Daphne Waggoner](#) (Sioux)

[A. Ella Johnson](#) (Seneca)

[Clemence LaTraille](#) (Chippewa)
[Elizabeth L. LaVatta](#) (Bannock)
[Minnie Billings](#) (Mohawk)
[Margaretta Goleach Reed](#) (Cherokee)
[Lillian E. Porterfield](#) (Washoe)
[Ruth Moore](#) (Sac & Fox)
[Louisa Kenney](#) (Klamath)
[Virginia Boone](#) (Nooksack)
[Effie Nori](#) (Pueblo)
[Ruth Walton](#) (Peoria)
[Minnie White](#) (St. Regis)

Day 4: Reconstructing Stories

Students share their initial discoveries and impressions. During the rest of class, students begin to study their files more carefully, looking to see what they can find out about the following questions. Some questions may require additional searching in the Digital Resource Center.

- When did the student come to the school and how long did she stay?
- Was her stay continuous?
- Had she attended other schools before Carlisle, or did she attend other schools afterward?
- Who appears to have filled out her application materials?
- What information do we have about her thoughts, activities and experiences while at the school?
- If there is a picture of her, how does it portray her?
- Did she go on outings? What can we know about them?
- Are there any mentions of wages in the file? If so, use an online historical currency converter to find out how much the wages are worth in today's money.
- Does she appear to have had any relatives at the school?
- Did she arrive at the school with other members of her nation? Were many other members of her nation present while she studied there?
- What does the file suggest about her life after the school?
- Did she get into any kind of trouble while a student?
- Are any other stories or anecdotes suggested from the file?

Continue close reading for homework.

Day 5: Extending Knowledge

This day is devoted to trying to identify additional information about students, beyond what appears in the student files. With teacher guidance, students should search the following sources within the Carlisle Digital Resource Center:

- Register of Pupils. 1890-1906.
- Consecutive Record of Pupils Enrolled. 1905-18.
- Attendance Books. 1884-91.
- Registers of “Outings,” 1881-87, 1912-18.
- Ledgers for Student Savings Accounts, 1890-1918.

Students should also search the [Carlisle Indian School Student Database at Gettysburg College](#) to find out if their student may appear in a school publication.

If possible, the teacher should also guide students in working with Ancestry.com to look for additional information.

For homework, students write a reflection on the following question:

According to your student’s file, was she a ‘success story’ at Carlisle? What makes her so (or not so)?

Day 6: Reading Against the Archive

The teacher should begin class by leading a discussion on what it means to be a ‘success story’ at Carlisle, extending that discussion into a deeper consideration of how and why Carlisle compiled student files. What kind of information is present, and what is absent? Who might the intended audience for these files be (directly or indirectly)? Do students believe that these files accurately represent students’ lives?

During the rest of class, students search for hints of resistance, rebellion and resilience in their files and discuss their findings with the class.

For homework, students search through their files for any mentions of places and record the events associated with them.

Day 7: Mapping Dislocation

Students begin class by researching the forced migrations of their student’s tribe since European contact and plotting those migrations on a blank map. Students should include relevant annotations concerning treaties, battles, removal, reservations, alterations to reservations, etc.

In a different color, students plot the information they can reconstruct about their student’s movement to Carlisle and afterward.

Class discussion should focus on the theme of dislocation and examine the boarding school experience as part of a long series of dislocations and ruptures beginning from European contact.

Day 8: Repercussions

The teacher should begin with a brief introduction to the ways in which federal removal of Indian children from Indian custody continued, even after the boarding school era. With teacher support, students spend the rest of class researching statistics and historical information on non-Indian custody of Indian children in their student's tribe, and use that information to create an infographic for a public awareness campaign.