

Facts Relating to the Shawnee Indian Mission State Historic Site History

My name is David Boutros. I have been a resident of Mission, Kansas for nearly forty years. I am a professional historian, and a retired archivist who directed the Western Historical Manuscript Collection-Kansas City (now the State Historical Society of Missouri Manuscripts-Kansas City) for almost thirty years. Beyond my usual role to collect, preserve and make available historical documents of the region, I assisted scholars and students in their research and edited and published two books, the most germane being *Cher Oncle, Cher Papa: the Francois and Berenice Chouteau*. Regarding the Mission, I have had the opportunity to read most all of the primary and secondary source documents, articles, and books related to its history. I am currently secretary for the Shawnee Indian Mission Foundation.

I strongly oppose House Bill 2208: the conveyance of the of the Shawnee Indian Mission Historic Site to the Shawnee Tribe of Miami, OK, primarily because I do not believe the Tribe would be a good steward to preserve and present the varied history of the site. I believe the Kansas State Historical Society, who has maintained the site since 1927—over three times longer than the Shawnee resided in Kansas—along with its partners of the City of Fairway and the Shawnee Indian Mission Foundation, as well as other organizations, agencies, and individuals who wish to constructively engage, would provide the public a richer, more complete and useful history. The Shawnee Tribe has expressed in their public statements an unfortunate interest in narrowing the interpretation of the site to the injustice of the boarding school experience for Native Americans. Though that injustice was real and should be part of any telling of the Mission story, as a Native American scholar recently told me, what occurred at the Indian Manual Labor School was a very mild form of the inherent racism of making the Indian into a white man. Moreover, the importance of the Mission is far greater than as a place where Indian children lived and learned.

The story of the Shawnee Indian Mission is about three big and many small stories. The first, and most obvious is the interaction among the Native American tribes, the missionaries, and the broader American culture and society. The second is the conflict over slavery which occupied and divided the nation and was especially nasty along the border of Kansas and Missouri. The last is about the great migration that moved peoples to and through the Kansas border and was an expression of the national dream of “Manifest Destiny”.

And there are other stories intertwined among these three about such things as education, religion, agriculture, industry, and urban development.

Because over the last several years there has been a concerted distribution of false facts, conjectures, and interpretations about the Shawnee Indian Mission State Historic Site, I wish to focus specifically on the history of the Mission as a school for Native American children for the years 1839-1862. This does not suggest that the other aspects if its history is less important—in fact, I believe Thomas Johnson’s and the Mission’s part in the slavery issue and the border war that ensued had a far greater impact and encompassed the whole region and all peoples, including the local Native American tribes. And, of course, it got Thomas Johnson murdered

because, though he owned a few slaves (who he freed about 1860), he was loyal to the Union and opposed to secession.

Regardless, the site began as a school and that point concerns its relationship to the Shawnee Tribe seeking to own it.

First a simple issue of its name: the school's original name was the Indian Manual Labor School (without Shawnee to denote it for ALL tribes). In the mid 1840s it became the Fort Leavenworth Indian Manual Labor School because it was in the Ft. Leavenworth Indian Agency district. In 1854 a new treaty and contract with the Methodist Episcopal Church, South renamed it the Shawnee Manual Labor School by which it was known until it closed in 1862. At no point did it have "Boarding School" in its name. From this final name, in 1927 it became the Shawnee Indian Mission State Historic Site. The National Register form lists it as either Shawnee Mission or Shawnee Methodist Mission. It should be noted that there were two interrelated institutions at the current site of the Shawnee Indian Mission: the Shawnee Methodist Mission funded primarily by the Methodist Church; and the Indian Manual Labor School, funded primarily by the U.S government.

This may seem a picky point except that in December 2021, someone edited the Wikipedia entry for the Mission changing the name to include "Boarding" which the editor claimed was more "appropriate". Moreover, an edit which fortunately was later removed stated the school "was one of the first such forced labor and religious indoctrination camps established in the territory acquired by the United States in the Louisiana Purchase." The point is that such terms are meant to link the Shawnee Indian Mission to the horrendous things that happened in Canada and at the U.S. Federally run mandated boarding schools that began nearly 20 years after the Shawnee Indian Mission closed its doors.

The 19th century was a brutal time, and the treatment of Native Americans and other minorities was worse than harsh. The attitude and policy toward the Indigenous peoples wavered between two poles—assimilation and annihilation. The Indians understood this which was one of the reasons the Shawnee Chief Fish sought to have a Methodist Mission School established by the Methodist Church (who chose Thomas Johnson as missionary) in 1830. Eight years later the larger Manual Labor School was built to serve all tribes, not just Shawnee, to train students both in academic subjects and various trades. Here are the facts:

- This was not a mandatory school. Students were enrolled by their parents; they were not forced to attend. In fact, there were some four other schools in the immediate vicinity (Baptist, Friends (Quakers), Presbyterian, and later the Methodist, North) to which children could be sent.
- Students were instructed in the traditional courses of reading, writing, math, geography and other subjects. Visitors who observed the lessons and testing often comment on the competency of the students and compared them favorable to schools for non-Natives. Before 1854 when the manual program was discontinued, students were taught skills, such as carpentry, blacksmithing, and farming for the boys and domestic arts for the

girls. As in today's trade schools they were taught by doing. There is indication in the record that if a student was especially skilled, he/she were paid for their work for special commissions. Some have suggested this was child labor. By our standard today the work may have been more rigorous. But in the 1830-1860s there were no child labor laws and children were expected to work from a relatively early age. Children at their homes would not be exempt from their chores. This applied to all children, not just Indians. One of the difficulties complained about by the teachers was that as the students gained in skills, parents removed them from school to work on the family farm instead.

- The Mission School had three terms: October-December, January-March, April-June. Between terms they returned to their homes.
- Yes, students were given two sets of clothes to wear. This might roughly be compared to school uniforms today. But in fact, there was a more practical issue. A visitor to the school was most embarrassed by the immodest dress of some arriving male students who wore little more than a loincloth. Remember this was a Methodist Mission during the Victorian age. Moreover, expectations were that students were there to acclimate to the White social norms.
- Relatedly, students were expected to learn and speak English. There were students from some 22 different tribes as well as teachers who may or may not have spoken any of those languages. Requiring English, in kind of an immersion teaching method, was necessary in the classroom and other similar situations. Again, speaking English was a necessary step for being able to function in the broader community. It seems highly unlikely that there was an enforceable universal ban on Native speaking especially considering that parents and other Native Americans were constantly visiting the school. Moreover, the students were only at the school for 8 months out of the year. Further, the missionaries either preached in native languages or used translators (themselves often trained preachers.) The record shows that the school had taught native language in the curriculum, and Johnson commissioned Methodist hymnals to be printed in Shawnee for use in services.
- This was a Methodist Church sponsored school and most of the students and their parents were likely Methodist. Parents and others often attended Sunday services. However, there is no indication attendance was required and it is known students of other denominations were at the school. As an example, because of the school's curriculum of manual training there is record of Baptist Missionaries bringing students to attend. This was not a "religious indoctrination camp".
- The Mission School was a boarding school in the sense students stayed there during their training. This resulted primarily because the earlier 1830 school was mostly a day school but provided limited space for students to stay over, given the distances involved for the various students. The new, larger all tribes school (1839) was designed from the beginning to have rooms for students. There is nothing inherently wrong in providing dormitories. The boys slept in the upper floor (attic) of the East building which was relatively standard for the period. It had plastered walls, windows at each end of the open room, and visual evidence suggests there were several stoves to heat the room. Female students slept in the North building. several to a room.

- The School had a large communal dining hall connected to the West building that served 3 meals a day to students, teachers, visitors, and staff families. The Mission was a working farm that was pretty much self-sufficient and in fact sold its surplus. The assertion that the students were malnourished is not likely. There are numerous reports of visitors who tell of the conditions and experience of dining at the Mission. Students, teachers and visitors all ate in the hall—and ate the same food. It should be reminded that the School was not isolated in that there was daily contact with the Shawnee Council House located approximately 6 miles west. Moreover, there were Native Americans on staff as translators, laborers, and even as teachers. Parents and visitors were always around.
- Construction of the three brick buildings [and the larger of the outbuildings including the steam mill] were by a contractor, who had the skills and staff, likely including slaves. Three Indian students who had mastered carpentry skills at the earlier Turner site school were hired to do the work on interior doors and window frames for the West Building. An architectural historian has noted in an article on the West building (1839) that its Flemish Bond brickwork “shows the building to be more refined than was previously acknowledged (making it even more special for its place and time).” This complex brick design suggests that the building was constructed by someone other than the Native students, and, in fact his name was David Lock of Carrollton, Illinois.

The land was provided by the Shawnee Tribe: “The chiefs discussed the plan with the rest of the tribe, and the Shawnees gave their assent to the Methodists, ‘with the privilege of using as much land and timber as would be necessary for carrying on the establishment.’” (Richard Cummins to C.A. Harris, October 18, 1838.)

The capital funds for the major buildings came from a combination of the United States Methodist Missionary Fund [over a period of years] and a one-time special appropriation by the Congress of the United States. It did not come from Tribal funds or from the parents. Later some monies specifically for lodging, boarding, clothing, and educating, did come from government funds allocated for education, kind of like today’s Federal grants to schools per number of students.

- Another issue relates to the ownership of the land. Several court cases, dating as far back as the 1860s and as recently as 2004, have ruled that the Shawnee Tribes have no property interest in what was previously part of their 1.6 million acre reservation in Kansas. The Shawnee are not aboriginal to Kansas and the Federal Government established several reservations in Kansas as a part of the Treaty of 1825, primarily carved from the Kaw lands. Courts repeatedly ruled that because the Shawnee Tribe was compensated when it sold the entire reservation back to the Federal Government in the treaty of 1854, they forfeited any claims to the property. In addition, the courts stated that because the entirety of the reservation was included in the transaction, it showed the government’s intent to terminate the reservation status of the land.

It is important to remember that the Shawnee and other tribes in the area were not homogenous in their views on missions, slavery, assimilation, and other issues. However, there was a Council that purported to speak for the tribe, to make treaties and other decisions. It was this Council who stipulated in the 1854 treaty, and later after the

school closed, that the land and buildings be conveyed to the Methodist Church, South, and then to Thomas Johnson. The Department of Indian Affairs agreed, and the land patent was signed by the President in 1865.

- The most controversial issue is the children who died at the school. Given the terrible news from Canada this is understandable and deserves attention. The accusation of mistreatment appears to arise from a lengthy letter from James Captain and Charles and John Fish to Commissioner of Indian Affairs Orlando Brown on April 22, 1850. Its primary purpose was to complain that Thomas Johnson was interfering with efforts to have a Methodist, North (anti-slavery) mission competing with his Methodist, South (pro-slavery) mission and school. They did not like Johnson's money-making activities and then asserted that the children were neglected, "maintained in a very miserable condition; parents scarcely recognize their children after a few months stay at the concern. These missionaries seem to be devoid of all sympathy either for us, or our children." As an example, they told of two children who got sick and died and were buried; but no effort was made to inform the parents of the illnesses or deaths. When the parents visited the school and could not find their children, Johnson informed them of the tragedy.

This story continued to circulate until the school finally closed, though the larger issue effecting the decline of the school was slavery and Johnson's enlarging ambition in both business and politics. Realistically there maybe a grain of truth to the complaints in the letter though it should be understood that its purpose was to attack Johnson and assert the Methodist, North's plan to establish a new competing school and strip funding from Johnson for its benefit. A few years later the Indian Agent William Gay surveyed families with school age children and found the rumors of neglect given for their children not being sent to the Mission school (along with the complaint that the school was too near to Westport where the boys would sneak off to get drunk!). He apparently discounted the stories because he told his superiors he would do his best to encourage attendance. Interestingly a similar letter appeared 10 years later in 1860 with the purpose again of stripping funding from the school and made the same claims of neglect.

Children died at the school—there are some 9 documented over the years that it operated. In addition, 6 of Johnson's 13 sons and daughters died there. During the years 1848-1853 major epidemics of Cholera and other deceases swept through the region. Population centers like Westport and Kansas City had more than half their people desert the towns because of the deaths from the illnesses.

But what happened to the children's bodies? Most likely they were transported to the Shawnee Cemetery near the Shawnee Council House with which, as mentioned earlier, the School was in daily contact. And how would the parents have been notified? Logically that responsibility would be given to the Council who would know better where the parents were and could get word to them.

There is no intent to defend Thomas Johnson as the School's administrator, but it is important to remember others were present at the School—teachers (some of whom

were Native American); visitors, both Native and White; parents; and of course students.

- The Indian Manual Labor School was not the same as the Federal Mandated Schools established well after the Mission school closed. Realistically some of the lessons learned by the pre-Civil War schools informed the methodology of the Federal schools, but it would be difficult to draw a direct line from one to the other. Some suggest that the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report (May 2022) paints the inclusion of the Shawnee Indian Mission in the report as a stain of obvious guilt. In fact, the School appears in the report only on a long list of known institutions.
- Lastly, the Shawnee Council voted a resolution in August of 2020 declaring the Shawnee Mission to be sacred lands. The document lacks specifics for this designation. The National Congress of American Indians (Resolution #SD-02-027) states "Recognition that sacred places are to be defined only as places that are sacred to practitioners of Native Traditional religions and that sacred places include land (surface and subsurface), water and air; burial grounds, massacre sites and battlefields; and spiritual commemoration, ceremonial, gathering, and worship areas." Federal regulations similarly narrow the definition: "'Sacred site' means any specific, discrete, narrowly delineated location on Federal land that is identified by an Indian tribe, or Indian individual determined to be an appropriately authoritative representative of an Indian religion, as sacred by virtue of its established religious significance to, or ceremonial use by, an Indian religion; provided that the tribe or appropriately authoritative representative of an Indian religion has informed the agency of the existence of such a site" (Executive Order No. 13007 which is cited in the Shawnee Tribe resolution and curiously only applies to Federal lands). It is not clear why the Mission is sacred, except that it was a significant part of the tribe's history. It should be noted that if that were the case it is equally significant to the 21 other tribes that provided students to the school. Regardless, though it is certainly the right of an individual or peoples to revere a place, person, or event as sacred or otherwise important, it is difficult to understand how the Methodist Mission qualifies for the above definitions.

Please do not construe anything above as disparaging the Shawnee's or any of the other tribes, history, beliefs, experiences, or role in the history of the Shawnee Methodist Mission. What this document does instead is challenge the flawed narrative that the Shawnee Tribe chooses to use to validate the takeover of the historic site. When the Tribe first expressed the desire to be part of a cooperative effort to support and interpret the Mission's story and we mutually agreed to work together there was great enthusiasm. The Shawnee had a prominent seat at the table. Unfortunately, that cooperative action did not materialize which is very disappointing. If in the future the Tribe again offers to join with the other partners and supporting organizations, it will be a welcome decision. People coming together in a collaborative way is important for interpretation of the Mission's history. All tribes and stakeholders who value the history of the Shawnee Indian Mission State Historic Site play an important role today, as they did in the past.