

A Landscape of Assimilation and Resistance: The Mount Pleasant Indian Industrial Boarding School

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Abstract In the late nineteenth century the United States Federal government established off-reservation boarding schools that sought to accomplish an internal colonialism of American Indian communities by forcefully assimilating them into mainstream American culture. The landscape of these institutions was a primary tool to achieve their assimilationist goals. This research examines the Mount Pleasant Indian Industrial Boarding School through archival, archaeological and oral history evidence. The landscape and material record of this school also indicate that students vigorously resisted the institution.

Keywords Federal Indian boarding schools · Colonialism · Landscape

Introduction

Federal Indian boarding schools were instituted as part of an internal colonial policy designed to forcefully assimilate American Indian children into mainstream United States society. The goal of Federal Indian boarding schools (hereafter FIBSs) was to strip American Indian children of their language, customs and religion, and prepare them for menial jobs in mainstream society generally in domestic and farm labor markets (Adams 1995; Child 2000; Littlefield 1996). The United States policy regarding American Indian populations shifted from “external colonialism” to “internal colonialism” in the late nineteenth century (Spencer-Wood 2013, pp. 399–400). Early colonial actions in North America were primarily external colonialism, while colonizers attempted to control resources, labor, and regional economies. As the North American colonies transformed into the Westernized nations of the United States and Canada,

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internal colonialism—the imposition of Western ideals on the colonized indigenous populations—became the primary colonial mechanism. This transition is particularly visible in the Great Lakes region, where external colonialism was the hallmark of the French colonial period and internal colonialism was the strategy utilized during the British and American colonial periods (Ferris 2009). FIBSs were born out of this later stage in the colonial process in North America.

This research examines the material and landscape indicators for internal colonialism and resistance to institutional hegemony at the Mount Pleasant Indian Industrial Boarding School (hereafter, MIIBS). I draw on archive data (e.g., school calendars and official documents, local newspapers, and other regional publications), oral histories recorded in 1991 during a reunion of boarding school students (Johnson 1991), and two field seasons of archaeological survey, excavation, and geophysical analysis (McCullough and McCullough 2012; Surface-Evans 2012, 2014). This research draws on feminist landscape theory (Spencer-Wood 2010, 2013), as well as complimentary work concerning the archaeology of institutions, confinement, and colonialism (Casella 2007, 2009; Lindauer 2009).

Spaces of Domination and Landscapes of Assimilation

As colonial institutions, FIBSs were a deliberate strategy to assimilate American Indian children into Western lifeways. The authority of institutions was the primary means of achieving this assimilation or “internal colonialism” (Casanova 1965). Suzanne Spencer-Wood (2013, pp. 400, also this issue) delineates three forms of internal colonialism: patriarchal, domestic, and gender/sexual colonialism. Patriarchal colonialism occurs when Western ideals of patriarchy are imposed on non-Western communities (for a full discussion see Spencer-Wood this issue). Domestic colonialism deals with expectations of middle-class domestic and house-keeping customs. Gender/sexual colonialism is the imposition of Western gender and sexual roles in the absence of patriarchal colonialism (Voss and Casella 2011, pp. 1–10). Both patriarchal and domestic colonialism were present in FIBSs, as these institutions imposed Western ideals of patriarchal relationships, gendered division of labor, and middle-class ethics towards housekeeping and child rearing (Spencer-Wood 2013). Spencer-Wood’s (2010) model of “powered landscapes” also provides a framework for interpreting the patterning of space at FIBSs. In particular, the concept of cultural “powers over” landscape in the creation of spaces that replicate and legitimize dominant ideologies is useful in the case of FIBSs, because it forefronts the dynamic role that landscape plays in social relationships of power (Spencer-Wood 2010).

Eleanor Conlin Casella’s (2007) research on the history of confinement provides another model for understanding the materiality of FIBSs. She characterizes institutions of confinement as places in which individual autonomy is suppressed through the expression of power (Casella 2007, p. 2). The application of and reaction to power leaves material signatures in the archaeological record that may not be observable in historical documents and records. Thus an archaeological approach allows one to consider how power was expressed materially by the institution and also how and if individuals accepted or resisted it. FIBSs were one of many institutions of confinement that sought to control segments of the population and mold them into a form of

“productive” labor; they were intimately tied to capitalism and Western views of labor (e.g., Littlefield 1996). Federal Indian boarding schools were modeled on this ideal and were established as vocational institutions of education (Adams 1995; Fear-Segal 2007; Littlefield 1996). The labor born at such institutions was rarely profitable. Rather, because labor was considered necessary and beneficial for the creation of reformed, disciplined, and compliant bodies, the social benefits of the practice outweighed the limited economic productivity (Cassella 2007).

A parallel development to the creation of institutions of confinement was the idea that architecture and refined spaces could have a transformative effect on those who inhabited them (Cassella 2007, p. 24). Architects designed institutions of confinement with attention to the ordering and use of space as an agent of social change, although philosophies regarding the nature of architectural spaces changed over time. For example, “powered landscapes” were created to transform, rehabilitate, and educate. Perhaps nothing exemplifies this movement more than Jeremy Bentham’s design of the Panopticon that Foucault (1977) argued served to create “docile bodies” which monitor and modify their own behavior to conform to the expectations of the institution. Critiques of Foucault, assert that inmates are social agents who reacted to their confinement with varying levels of resistance (Grosz 1994; Spencer-Wood 2009, 2010; Zedner 1991). My research at MIIBS incorporates attributes of Foucault’s perspective of institutionalized power, yet acknowledges the ability of individuals to actively resist power.

Historian Jacqueline Fear-Segal (2007) proposes that aspects of the Panopticon design were incorporated into FIBSs. Her analysis of the Carlisle Indian School (the first FIBS established by Richard Henry Pratt in 1879) reveals that surveillance was an intentional design of the campus (Fear-Segal 2007, p. 207). While the Carlisle school was a repurposed military barracks, Fear-Segal argues that aspects of its plan were intentionally redesigned and emphasized to heighten the power of the institution over children. In particular, the bandstand or gazebo at the geographic center of the campus was cleverly used by the administration of Carlisle to “control, intimidate, and manipulate the children” (Fear-Segal 2007, p. 210). This was accomplished by the creation of an all-knowing persona called the Man-on-the-Bandstand. The Man communicated to Carlisle students in the pages of the school newspaper, *Indian Helper*, and was the voice of authority and Christian morality for the school administration. From the bandstand, he could “see all the quarters ... the grounds, everything and everybody” (Fear-Segal 2007, pp. 213). There is some evidence to suggest that the Man-on-the-Bandstand was Richard Henry Pratt, the man credited for designing FIBSs. “Pratt’s imposing six-foot high figure, silhouetted on the bandstand, gave a shadowy reality to this imaginary man” (Fear-Segal 2007, p. 210). While quasi-fictive, the voice of the Man-on-the-Bandstand in the school newspaper and his seemingly omnipotent knowledge gained from the central vantage point on campus appear to be crucial to the assimilation process. While Fear-Segal does not explicitly discuss it, the Carlisle landscape and Man-on-the-Bandstand strongly suggests the role of patriarchal colonialism at FIBSs.

Some aspects of the built landscape at FIBSs appear counter to a model of dominance. Most FIBS campuses have park-like settings with extensive lawns, arbors, and reflecting pools or fountains. This careful attention to landscaping is not as innocent as it may seem and is a prime example of the use of landscape in exerting “powers over” boarding school students (Spencer-Wood 2010). The park-like elements

of boarding schools represent part of an overall ideal in the nineteenth century in which landscape played a role in social reform and enlightenment (Blodgett 1976; Cassella 2007; Taylor 1999). These constructed and seemingly pleasant landscapes may have been merely a canvas on which students were posed and photographed in contrived scenes of Western play (Fig. 1). Such free play was not normally part of the students' daily routine at FIBSs. This was yet another way in which (predominantly female) students were controlled and used to convey a bucolic landscape and champion the civilizing nature of the schools. These images were widely distributed and published, even as postcards, to prove to colonial observers that the boarding school experiment was successful (e.g. Adams 1995).

A Brief History of MIIBS

MIIBS was one of hundreds of off-reservation FIBSs established by the United States government in the late nineteenth century, but it was the only Federal Indian boarding school in the State of Michigan (Fig. 2). Its placement in Isabella County made it centrally located within the state and it was adjacent to the reservation established for the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe. Thousands of children from the Chippewa, Menominee, Miami, Mohawk, Ottawa, and Potawatomi Tribes attended MIIBS during its 40-year period of operation, ca. 1893–1933. MIIBS offered vocational education for children aged 5–15, whereby students supported a self-sustained farming operation encompassing 320 ac (129.5 ha) (Balabuch 2010; Littlefield 1983).

Vocational training was constrained within narrowly defined gender norms. Boys primarily performed the farm labor, providing milk, eggs, meat, and produce for the school (Miller and Seely 1906). In general, the career skills learned by boys were out of date and prepared them for only low-status and menial jobs as wage laborers (Littlefield 1996). Littlefield (1996, pp. 119) argues that boarding schools sought to accomplish proletarianization; transferring American Indians from an ambiguous status within a capitalist economy to the working class. Girls were trained in basic skills to work as domestic servants (sewing, cooking, and nursing), but were simultaneously held to middle-class standards of domesticity and motherhood (Adams 1995; Paxton 2006). For example, girls were required to take turns staying in the domestic science building,



Fig. 1 Panoramic photo (cropped) of MIIBS with students posed on the school lawn, ca. 1900. Note the location of a gazebo or bandstand at the center of the grounds next to the “reflecting pond.” (Courtesy the Library of Congress, Reproduction Number: LC-USZ62-123519)

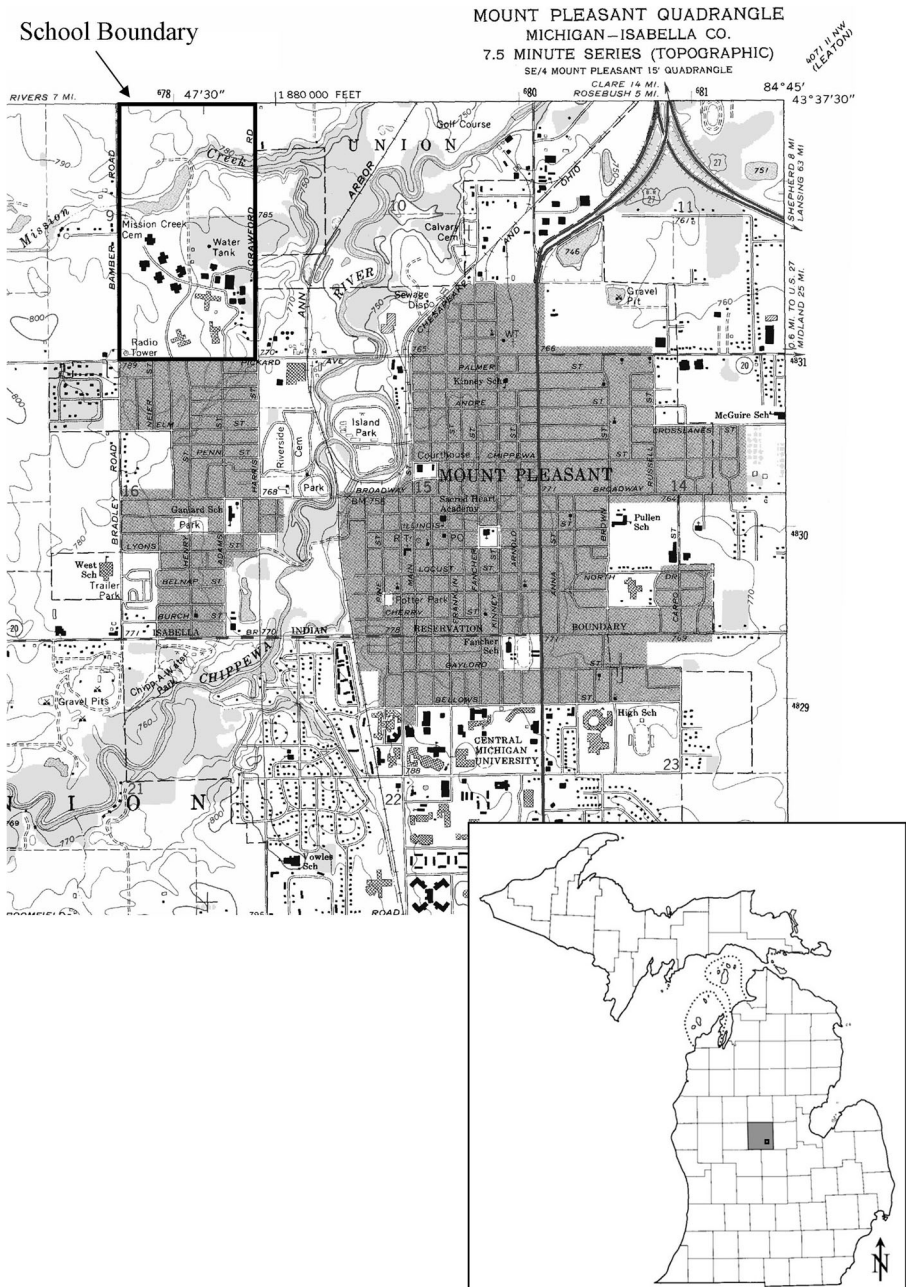


Fig. 2 Location of MIIBS campus in Isabella County, Michigan and on the Mount Pleasant U.S.G.S 7.5 Minute Quadrangle

where they cooked for and entertained guests daily (e.g., Isabella County Enterprise 1906; Miller and Seely 1906). Like most FIBSs, MIIBS had an outing system where girls worked for no or low pay as domestic servants in middle-class households

(Littlefield 1996; Mount Pleasant 1911). Girls were often treated poorly and physically or sexually abused in these contexts (Child 2000; Paxton 2006; Trafzer et al. 2006). Female labor was highly exploited by the institution (Littlefield 1996; Paxton 2006). For instance, in the 1922–23 academic year, a total of \$2684 worth of goods were produced by female students working in the Laundry (Littlefield 1996, pp. 113). Female livelihoods and gender roles were much more diverse in the communities from which the American Indian children came. For example, in the Anishinaabe communities, from which many MIIBS students came, women kept their own councils and were keepers of traditional knowledge and lands associated with wild rice harvesting. These practices all but disappeared during the boarding school era (Child 2012).

Daily life at MIIBS was rigid and disciplinary practices were harsh (Balabuch 2010; Littlefield 1983). Students were often injured during their work and deaths due to frequent outbreaks of communicable diseases such as measles, meningitis, flu, scarlet fever, typhoid fever, and tuberculosis were extremely common (e.g., Central Michigan Times 1907, 1909). Students engaged in military-style drills and other aspects of military indoctrination (e.g., Isabella County Enterprise 1910, 1917). The military model emphasized the adherence to rules and established the subordination of American Indian children to the predominately White administrators.

MIIBS closed in 1933 and the following year it was deeded to the State of Michigan to be used as the Michigan Home for Developmental Delays until 2006. Over the years, many of the former MIIBS buildings were removed or replaced (e.g., Isabella County News 1938). Today, only six of the original brick structures remain on roughly 12 ac (4.9 ha) of land acquired by Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe of Michigan (hereafter, SCIT) in 2011. After purchasing the land, SCIT organized a committee to study, preserve, and restore MIIBS to promote public education about the FIBS era. The committee also seeks to address generational trauma within the SCIT community and other regional tribes. I am a consulting member of this committee and all archaeological research at MIIBS is part of this larger community-based initiative. Archaeological investigation, consisting of shovel test survey, geophysical prospecting, and select excavation, was conducted as field schools in 2012 and 2013 (McCullough and McCullough 2012; Surface-Evans 2012, 2014). This research reconstructed the MIIBS landscape and identified the foundations of eight former buildings; portions of three of buildings were excavated.

Landscapes of Colonialism at MIIBS

Several aspects of the MIIBS campus reflect policies derived from patriarchal colonialism through the dominance of Western culture and subordination of American Indian children. For example, the principal campus buildings are imposing structures with Neo-classical facades that combine elements of both Greek and Federalists styles (Harris 1977) (Fig. 3). Neo-classical style, expressed in architecture, art, and landscape design, conveyed order and authority and was an integral part of the civilizing of the New World (Winterer 2005). Due to these associative meanings, neo-classical architecture was adopted for countless governmental buildings at the national, state, and local levels, including schools, hospitals, state capitols, and courthouses (Irwin 1997).



Fig. 3 Photograph of the Neo-classical facade of the classroom and chapel building at MIIBS, taken by the author in June 2012. Note architectural elements including, Greek-style portico, Doric pillars, and symmetry of design

MIIBS campus buildings were organized along a north-south axis with a large, park-like lawn facing the Crawford Road to the east (Fig. 4). The park-like grounds presented a pleasant façade that was particularly conspicuous to the neighboring colonial community (e.g. *Isabella County Enterprise* 1907). Landscaping was among the civilizing elements in the school design. Newspaper reports reveal that landscapers were hired to improve the school grounds; an extravagance on the limited school budget (*Isabella County Enterprise* 1893, 1905a). Archaeological investigations recovered numerous fragments of terracotta flowerpots on the grounds, particularly near where visitors might be entertained, such as the reflecting pool/bandstand area and domestic science building.

The reflecting pool was constructed in 1905, shortly after the possible arson of the school's Laundry (*Isabella County Enterprise* 1904, 1905a) and can be read as an attempt by school administrators to reinstate control over the students. The reflecting pool was placed directly in front of the classroom building at the center of campus. Its location magnified the importance of the principal academic building and symbolically reinforced the centrality and authority of Western culture over students. A large wooden bandstand was among the first structures built on campus and was enlarged on several occasions (*Isabella County Enterprise* 1903a). It was also located at the center of the school grounds, south of the reflecting pool. Student dormitories, dining hall, and various vocational buildings radiated out from the classroom-reflecting pool-bandstand complex at the center. The central location of the bandstand at MIIBS replicates the pattern observed at Carlisle (Fear-Segal 2007).

The layout of MIIBS campus also displays aspects of domestic colonialism by utilizing a separate spheres ideology (Paxton 2006; Spencer-Wood 2013). There was a strict division of male and female occupants and work within the school grounds (Fig. 5). All of the buildings to the north of the classroom

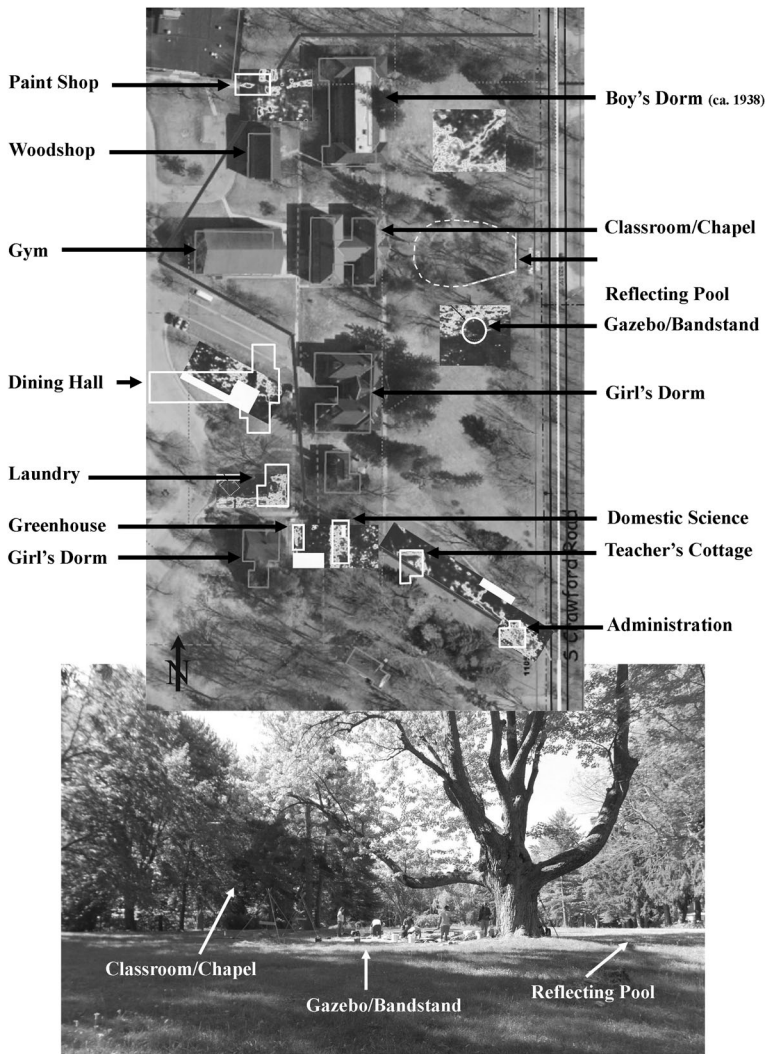
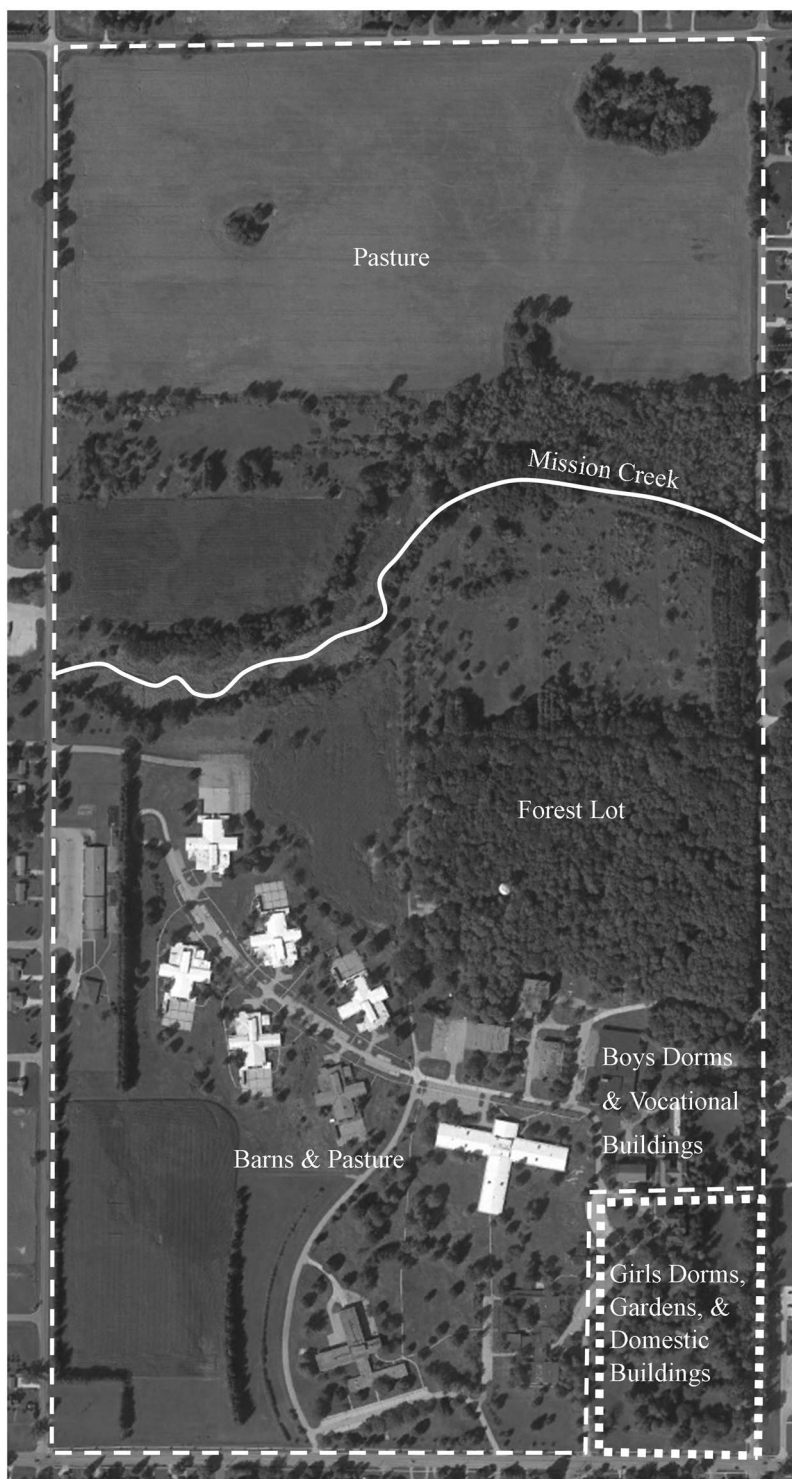


Fig. 4 Layout of MIIBS main campus area. Aerial photograph showing the locations of buildings (extant outlined in *gray*, razed outlined in *white*). Photograph of grounds east of the classroom/chapel building during excavation at the gazebo, taken by the author June 2012

building were associated with masculine activities and all of the buildings to the south were associated with feminine activities. The boy's area included the masculine vocational buildings, the athletic fields, agricultural fields, and a wooded lot. Girls dorms were spatially associated with the laundry, greenhouse, domestic science, and hospital buildings at the south end of the campus. Quarters for single staff members were similarly segregated.

Fig. 5 Modern aerial photo of the MIIBS campus with locations of male and female activities indicated. Note that female student buildings (dorms, laundry, greenhouse, domestic science, and hospital) were spatially restricted to the SE corner of the campus. Buildings in pasture area are from post-boarding school era



The most striking aspect of this organization of space is the inequality of its division (see Fig. 5). The division of space at MIIBS replicates the differential treatment and status of boys and girls at FIBSs (Paxton 2006). Boys had comparatively more freedom, more room to move, and enjoyed a wider variety of activities. According to MIIBS oral history, boys were allowed to roam the northern 300 ac (121 ha) of the school grounds and frequently hunted and fished in the forest lot and nearby Mission Creek (Johnson 1991). Female students, on the other hand, were spatially restricted to less than 20 ac (8.1 ha) of the school. This spatial distinction between male and female students (and even employees) was a symbolic representation of the subordinate role of females within Western society and yet another expression of patriarchal colonization.

The vocational activities for female students are indicative of the expectations of domestic colonization being strongly tied to Victorian ideals of feminine domesticity (Fig. 6). Girls were also instructed in middle-class childrearing practices, as native childrearing practices were consistently misunderstood and devalued by policymakers (e.g. Child 2012; Paxton 2006).

Part of girls' domestic training included caring for dolls (e.g., Lindauer 1996). While not extremely common, fragments of bisque dolls were recovered at MIIBS within the female portions of the campus (see Fig. 6a). Girls were also trained in how to keep a house and entertain guests in preparation for working as domestic servants and establishing their own homes. While ceramics recovered at the school are primarily plain, utilitarian ironstone, fragments of decorative tea services and tableware indicative of entertaining were recovered near the girl's dorms and domestic science building (see Fig. 6b). Free labor provided by female students featured daily work in the laundry, where girls sewed, mended, and washed clothing. Laundry and sewing related implements, such as needles and buttons were also recovered in the south school grounds (see Fig. 6c). Because archaeological investigations are still preliminary, there is not

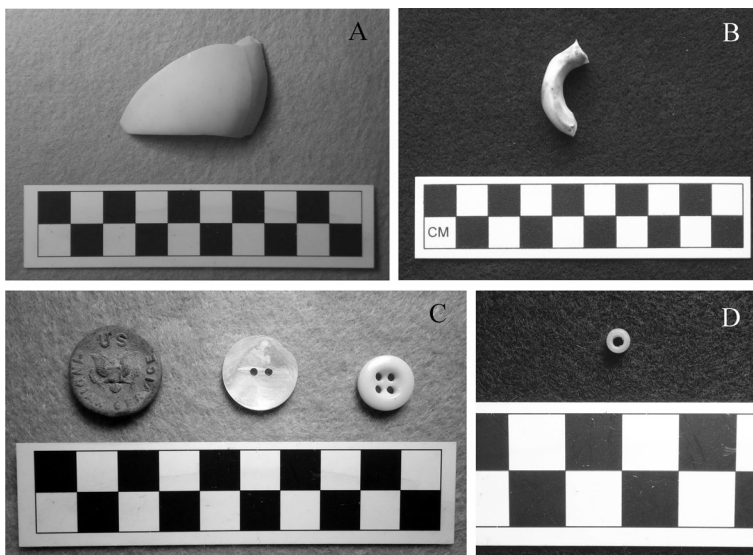


Fig. 6 Artifacts recovered from feminine-gendered activity areas. **a** Fragment of bisque doll head. **b** Teacup handle with gold enamel. **c** Three examples of typical buttons from the site: U.S. Indian Service button, shell button, glass button. **d** Turquoise colored glass bead

currently enough data to determine the degree to which girls complied with or identified with these imposed gender roles. However, there is evidence to suggest that girls actively resisted the institution in ways that will be discussed in the next section.

In addition to Western sewing traditions, MIIBS administrators permitted girls to make beaded objects. Beadwork is a highly respected traditional female craft in Anishinaabe communities (Child 2012). While conducting research at MIIBS, a woman whose grandmother attended the school shared with me that her grandmother learned beadwork as a student. One small turquoise-colored glass bead was found during shovel test survey near the domestic science building, where girls were permitted to do beadwork (see Fig. 6d). It would be overly optimistic to think that administrators permitted these arts to allow girls to retain their culture. Rather, this is probably another example of boarding schools exploiting female labor and products. The objects of art produced by girls were sold or given away, much like the manufacture of traditional ceramic vessels occurred at the Phoenix school (Lindauer 1996). Alternatively, administrators may have sanctioned beadwork in order to prevent the subversive potential of this activity within the student body.

Indicators of Resistance at MIIBS

American Indian children (and their parents) were not passive recipients of assimilation, but were active agents in resisting the dominance of the institution (Adams 1995; Child 2000). The most common and subtle forms of resistance utilized by students, such as refusing to eat or ingesting toxic substances (Adams 1995), or continuing to speak native languages (Child 2000), would have left no material record, but are well documented in oral histories (Johnson 1991). Forms of resistance that left material indicators at MIIBS ranged from small acts to extreme and destructive measures.

Acquiring contraband and misuse of school resources is one common example of a subtle form of resistance that most students participated in (e.g., Child 2000). For example, students at numerous schools used small, easily acquired tokens, such as clay marbles or buttons from their clothing, as a form of currency among themselves (Child 2000; Lindauer 1996). Stories recounted by former MIIBS students reveal that they held powwows and pipe ceremonies in the basements of the dormitories and in the wooded lot on the campus (Balabuch 2010; Johnson 1991; Reichert 2011). A button or marble was the cost of participation in such events. Archaeological survey recovered buttons and clay marbles in all areas of the school grounds, indicating that these objects were common and ubiquitous (Fig. 7a). The acquisition, circulation and retaining of contraband could take many forms. However, an explicit form of contraband at FIBSs was an object that conveyed Indian ideology, spirituality, or traditions that were not permitted by the institution. At the Phoenix School, archaeologists recovered stone animal effigies, carved fetishes, and flint-knapped bifaces in the school dump (Lindauer 1996, 2009). Such objects display traditional Indian spiritual practices and are interpreted as contraband that was found and discarded by school administrators. Contraband at MIIBS may include three colonial period green glass trade beads found at the bandstand foundation (Fig. 7b). These beads are not like those used for beadwork and likely represent personal objects curated by a family and brought from home by a student. The beads may have been accidentally lost or were purposefully hidden to conceal them from school administrators.

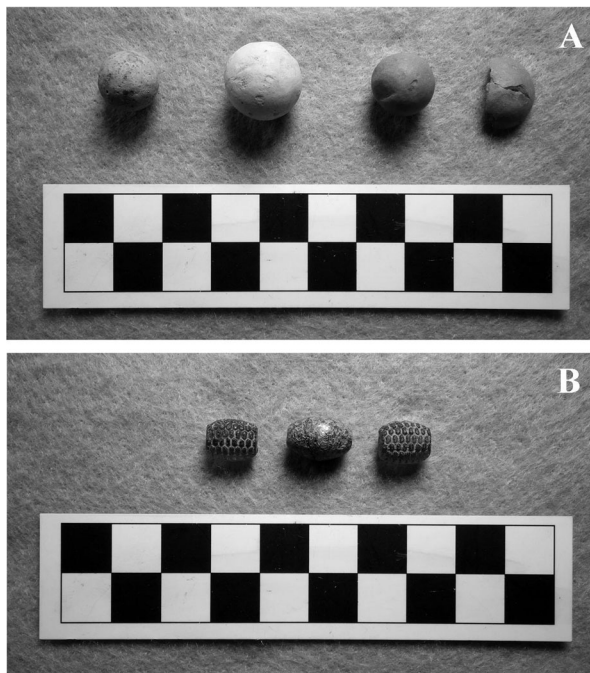


Fig. 7 **a** Examples of clay marbles. **b** Possible contraband items: three glass beads

Some students responded to their harsh treatment and homesickness with extreme measures, such as running away (Balabuch 2010; Child 2012). At least 35 cases of runaways, predominately male (80 %, $n = 28$), were documented in local newspapers from 1892 to 1925. Probably the most notable example of rebellion at MIIBS was the intentional arson of the large girl's dormitory and possible arson of the laundry building. Before dawn on June 14, 1899, Martha set fire to her dormitory, which also happened to be the original structure of the boarding school (Isabella County Enterprise 1899a, b). This fire completely destroyed the structure. Martha confessed to the arson and to the attempted arson of the Laundry building. Martha remains a folk-hero among Anishinaabe communities in Michigan. It is interesting to note that these structures are both associated with female-gendered spaces at MIIBS. Given that female runaways were rare, it is possible that starting fires was seen as a better option for female students seeking freedom from the institution.

Arson was also a way to strike back at the institution and materially corrode its power. Another fire completely destroyed the laundry building in 1904 (Isabella County Enterprise 1904). The circumstances of this fire are unknown, but as the buildings were heated by a separate boiler house (Isabella County Enterprise 1897, 1905b), it is unlikely that it was accidental. Our 2012 excavations of the laundry foundation uncovered ample evidence of the fire as burnt building materials, melted glass, and laundry related debris. Given the difficult working conditions that girls encountered in the laundry, it is not surprising that it might also be a target for such an act of rebellion. Other fires are documented at the school (Isabella County Enterprise 1895, 1909) and appear to be a recurrent problem. Administrators frequently sought to prevent fires by adding infrastructure improvements, such as constructing with fire-

proof materials and adding water suppression systems (Isabella County Enterprise 1903b, 1904).

Conclusions

MIIBS was an institution of confinement with the explicit purpose of assimilating American Indian children into American society as a form of internal colonialism. Archaeological data, in conjunction with archival documents and oral histories, have added to our understandings of the dynamic interplay of authority and resistance that took place within the school grounds. The built environment, controlled by the school administrators, sought to shape students' perceptions by exerting power over them and structuring their movement and activity. The segregated nature of the masculine and feminine spheres reveals the domestic colonial policies of the school. Female students were spatially restricted, symbolically representing their submissive roles within American life and the devaluation of their economic contribution. However, MIIBS students were not passive receptors of assimilation. They exercised varying degrees of resistance, some of which can be observed in the archaeological record. Archaeological research at MIIBS has confirmed stories of student rebellion recounted in oral histories and archival documents. Most notably, students' attempts to physically destroy the institution by arson. Future work at MIIBS will focus on examining the material record for additional indicators of resistance, as well as more data pertinent to gendered activities at the school.

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