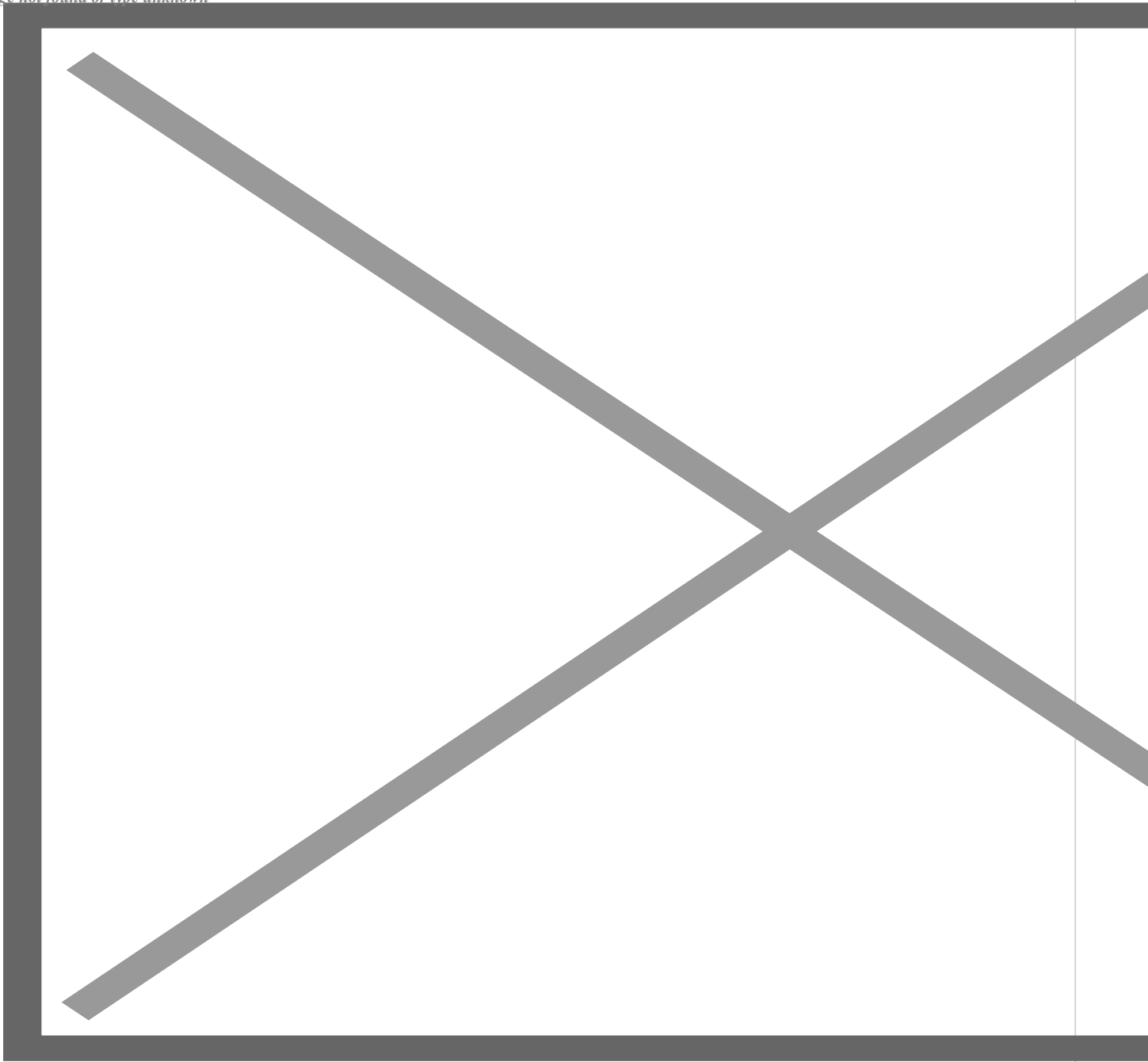


Native children’s remains in U.S. to be returned to families

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The U.S. military has begun disinterring the remains of eight Native American children in a small cemetery on the grounds of the U.S. Army War College in Pennsylvania to return them to their families.

Philadelphia, June 16 (RHC)-- The U.S. military has begun disinterring the remains of eight Native American children in a small cemetery on the grounds of the U.S. Army War College in Pennsylvania to return them to their families.

The disinterment process, which began over the past several days, is the fifth at Carlisle, Pennsylvania since 2017. More than 20 sets of Native remains were transferred to family members in earlier rounds.

The children had lived at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, where thousands of Native children were taken from their families and forced to assimilate into white society as a matter of U.S. policy -- their hair cut and their clothing, language and culture stripped.

More than 10,000 children from more than 140 tribes passed through the school between 1879 and 1918, including famous Olympian Jim Thorpe.

"If you survived this experience and were able to go back home, you were a stranger. You couldn't even speak the language your parents spoke," Rae Skenandore, of the Oneida Nation in Wisconsin, told The Associated Press news agency. She is a relative of Paul Wheelock, one of the children whose remains will be disinterred.

The off-reservation government boarding schools -- Carlisle was the first, with 24 more that followed -- "ripped apart tribes and communities and families", said Skenandore, adding she lost part of her own culture and language as a result. "I don't know if we can ever forgive."

She and her mother, 83-year-old Loretta Webster, plan to make the trip to Carlisle later this month. Webster said her own father ran away from a similar boarding school in Wisconsin when he was 12.

"It was like a prison camp, what they were putting these little kids in," Webster said. "It's a part of our history that's really traumatic and still affects the community today."

The children to be disinterred came from the Washoe, Catawba, Umpqua, Ute, Oneida and Aleut tribes. The sex and approximate age of each child will be verified, according to Renea Yates, director of the Office of Army Cemeteries, with archaeological and anthropological support from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

U.S. Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, who is the first Native American to serve as a cabinet secretary, launched last year an investigation into boarding schools to "uncover the truth about the loss of human life and the lasting consequences" of the institutions.

The probe produced its first report in May, revealing that the Interior Department had identified at least 53 separate burial sites at federal Native American boarding schools, and officials expect to find more as the investigation continues.

"It is my priority to not only give voice to the survivors and descendants of federal Indian boarding school policies, but also to address the lasting legacies of these policies so Indigenous peoples can continue to grow and heal," Haaland said in a statement accompanying the report.

Marsha Small, a Native American researcher, told Al Jazeera last month that because the government and churches had no respect for Indigenous children, they likely did not properly account for every death.

“They’re going to find that there are more bodies than there are records,” Small said. “It was genocide.”

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