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List Expands On DOI's Findings On Native Boarding Schools

By [Crystal Owens](#) · [Listen to article](#)

Law360 (May 10, 2023, 9:27 PM EDT) -- Historians and archivists have officially identified 87 sites throughout the United States that were Catholic-affiliated Native American boarding schools, marking "a powerful step forward" and "a significant step toward truth-telling" in an ongoing reexamination of how such schools committed atrocities against children, even resulting in their death, tribal leaders say.

The release of the information Tuesday came just weeks after [U.S. Department of the Interior](#) officials announced a \$4 million partnership with the [National Endowment for the Humanities](#) to expand its Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative through the collection and digitization of records documenting the experiences of survivors, and their descendants, of federal boarding school policies.

The list of Catholic-led boarding schools, compiled by volunteer historians and tribal leaders, is the most comprehensive look to date at the church's involvement in the assimilation of Native American children into a white, Christian society, according to the Catholic Truth & Healing website. The website was constructed by the group to release its findings, which detail each school and the tribal nations it impacted, among other information.

"While there are more steps for the Catholic Church to take to move toward truth, healing and reconciliation, this list is a powerful step forward," Maka Black Elk, executive director for Truth and Healing at Red Cloud Indian School, said in a statement.

Black Elk was one of dozens of archivists, historians and tribal leaders who contributed their efforts to compile the data "to provide a resource to help boarding school survivors, their descendants, tribal nations and the church itself investigate the history of the Catholic involvement with Native boarding schools."

Many of the hundreds of government-funded boarding schools were operated from 1819 to the 1970s by religious groups, including Catholic dioceses.

The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition in 2020 published its "List of Indian Boarding Schools in the United States," which identified 367 schools throughout the country. In May 2022, the DOI released its findings on Native American boarding schools, confirming that for 150 years the federal government established the boarding schools with the primary objective of assimilating children into Christian culture.

The DOI report showed that children were forcibly taken from their homes and stripped of their Native American identities, beliefs and languages. Burial sites were found at 53 schools, according to the report, and more than 500 children died at 19 schools. The DOI is expected to release an updated report, although its publication date is not yet known.

The Catholic Church has recently taken steps to make amends for past atrocities committed against Native Americans.

On March 30, The Vatican [formally rejected](#) the colonial-era "Doctrine of Discovery," which was the framework Spain, Portugal and England used to justify the conquest of Indigenous lands. Catholic bishops endorsed the statement from the Vatican along with tribal nations that praised it as a broader reckoning with "the history of oppression and ... legacies of colonialism."

Jaime Arsenault, tribal historic preservation officer for the White Earth Band of the [Minnesota Chippewa Tribe](#), described the list as "a significant step toward truth-telling."

"Before there can be truth-telling, there must first be truth-finding. Basic information, such as how many Catholic-run Native American boarding schools operated in the United States and where they were located is critical information that must be known for the truth-telling and the reconciliatory process to take place," Arsenault said.

The group charged with compiling the list began discussing the issue in 2021, according to the report, and determined that a separate compilation independent of the federal government's report on sites operated by Catholic entities would help to identify the scope of the church's involvement in the boarding school systems.

To compile the list, the group compared data from the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition with information from Marquette University's guide to Catholic records about Native Americans and the Commission of Indian Affairs' annual report to

come up with 400 potential schools that at one point had some Catholic oversight.

Members of the group then compared their initial list with historic Catholic directories, records from the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions and other sources to determine which of the sites were identified as boarding schools. Religious groups, communities and dioceses were then asked to verify that the information was as accurate as possible.

The list is a work in progress, according to the group, because not all the information could be corroborated with sources and there may be some boarding schools that have not yet been identified.

The group said it plans to update the list on an annual basis as more information becomes available to researchers.

--Additional reporting by Ali Sullivan. Editing by Rich Mills.