

Rebuttal to HB 2384: Opposing the Transfer of the Shawnee Indian Mission

Osiyo (hello),

Melissa Garrett Wadulisi da-qua-do-a (my name is). I am an enrolled citizen of the Cherokee, Quapaw, and Seneca Cayuga Nations. I deeply value my heritage and the diverse histories that shape our communities. While I do not speak on behalf of my tribes or all Indigenous peoples, I proudly represent Wadulisi's Contemporary Indigenous Food Business and serve as an Indigenous presence in Kansas City. In addition, I contribute to the community as an education consultant, a member of an education committee, and a recently appointed board committee member.

I am also the granddaughter of a Carlisle Federal boarding school survivor. My grandfather, William Conner Sr., was born in 1900 and forcibly taken to Carlisle at a young age, where he remained until 1917. The Shawnee Indian Mission operated as an Indian school from 1836 to 1862, whereas federally mandated boarding schools did not begin operating until 1879 and continued until 1918, when they were transferred from the War Department to the Department of the Interior. Carlisle enrolled over 7,800 children from 140 Native American tribes, but it was eventually closed, in part due to its use by the Department of Defense. It is now part of the U.S. Army War College. My grandfather served in both World War I and World War II, a path shaped by his time at Carlisle. He wrote several letters seeking basic necessities, reflecting the challenges faced by students at federally mandated boarding schools-an experience that is not comparable to that of students at the Shawnee Indian Mission.

At the Shawnee Indian Mission, parents were allowed to visit their children at weekend mission events and church gatherings, and children could return home for summers and holidays. This stands in stark contrast to the experiences at Carlisle and Haskell, two boarding schools I am most familiar with. At Haskell, culture was systematically erased, and at Carlisle, assimilation was strictly

enforced. Unlike these schools, where all teachers were white, several of the educators at the Shawnee Indian Mission were Indigenous.

While assimilation did occur at the Mission, equating it with federally mandated boarding schools oversimplifies history and misrepresents the realities of each institution. The Shawnee Indian Mission maintained detailed records of the children who attended, whereas records at Haskell and Carlisle were often lost or altered-some graves even bear the inscription "accidentally killed." The narrative surrounding the Mission is being misrepresented, casting it in a wholly negative light. As the granddaughter of a survivor of a federally mandated boarding school, I find it problematic to conflate these institutions, as doing so diminishes the unique suffering experienced by those forced into federal boarding schools.

1. A Place of Shared History, Not Sole Ownership

The Shawnee Indian Mission holds historical significance for many groups, not just one tribe. This land carries the stories of 22 different tribes, early settlers, enslaved and freed African Americans, and individuals involved in major historical events such as the Oregon Trail, Bleeding Kansas, and the Civil War. As a Native American married to an African American, I recognize the deep historical impact this site has on both our peoples. Granting ownership to a single tribe risks narrowing the broader historical narrative and limiting representation.

2. Strong Indigenous Presence Without Exclusive Ownership

A strong Indigenous presence at the Shawnee Indian Mission can be achieved without transferring ownership to a single tribe. A collaborative approach involving multiple tribes, historians, and preservationists would ensure that all narratives are honored. This site provides an opportunity for unity rather than exclusivity.

3. Not a Federally Mandated Boarding School

Although the Shawnee Indian Mission played a role in assimilation, it was not a federally mandated boarding school. Many Indigenous leaders of the time believed that equipping their children with diverse skills would help preserve their communities. While we now recognize the shortcomings of this approach, it was fundamentally different from the federal boarding schools that operated under the motto "Kill the Indian, Save the Man." Portraying the Shawnee Indian Mission in the same light as federal boarding schools is historically inaccurate and risks distorting the truth for political or financial gain.

4. The Danger of Exploiting Historical Trauma

History should be honored and respected, not exploited. The pain of our ancestors should not be commodified for profit, tourism, or selective storytelling. The history of the Shawnee Indian Mission must be presented with honesty and accuracy, ensuring that no single narrative overshadows the others.

5. Recognizing the Kaw Nation's Ancestral Claim

If land is to be returned, the ancestral homeland of the Kaw (Kanza) Nation must be acknowledged. The Shawnee people were relocated to Kansas and remained there for only a few decades, whereas the Kaw lived in the region for thousands of years. Overlooking this deeper historical context does a disservice to all Indigenous peoples.

Conclusion

Rather than transferring ownership to a single tribe, we should pursue an inclusive, multi-tribal, and state-supported preservation model that honors the full scope of the site's history. The Shawnee Indian Mission should remain a public historic site, safeguarded and interpreted in a manner that reflects its complex and multifaceted past.

Wado (thank you).

For these reasons, I strongly oppose HB 2384 and urge lawmakers to consider a more inclusive and historically responsible alternative.