

[Back to Overview](#)



The school building, constructed in 1910, as it looked in the 1940s. Mission to Partnership Collection, "File Hills Indian Residential School, Balcarres, Sask.," 93.049P1127 N, United Church of Canada Archives - Digital Collections

"Melvina McNabb was 7 years old when she was enrolled in the File Hills school, and [she says,] 'I couldn't talk a word of English. I talked Cree and I was abused for that, hit, and made to try to talk English.'" (Vol 1, Pt. 1, p. 623)

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*The late Elder Charlie Bigknife of Starbaket Reserve spoke on the half-time model at Indian Residential Schools: "I believe a lot of us today went to those boarding schools across Canada, we could've been doctors, nurses or whatever. We could've made something of ourselves but we were denied these privileges."*

Callahan, A. B., 2002, On Our Way to Healing: Stories from the Oldest Living Generation of the File Hills Indian Residential School. Masters Thesis. University of Manitoba, p. 42.



The cairn at File Hills Residential School erected June 1939 by the W.M.S. to commemorate 50 years of Christian service among the Indians at File Hills. Mission to Partnership Photograph Collection. 93.049P1136. (The cairn is all that remains on the site.)

# FILE HILLS INDIAN R

The [File Hills Indian Residential School](#) (1889 - 1949) was run by the [Presbyterian Church](#) from its opening in 1889 until the [United Church of Canada](#) took over in 1925. The school was located north of Balcarres on the boundary of the [Okanese reserve](#), and adjacent to the File Hills Agency Indian reserves on [Treaty 4 land](#). The school could initially accommodate 25 children. By 1948 enrollment was up to 100 students, an overcrowded situation. The plumbing was deemed unsanitary, and the building a fire hazard. The school closed in 1949. Children close by attended day school, while other were sent to Brandon or Portage la Prairie residential schools.<sup>1</sup>

## Deaths and Illness

File Hills school was plagued with illness. Two years after opening the school, in 1890, a report was filed that small pox had broken out.<sup>2</sup> In 1908, [Principal Kate Gillespie](#) (who had formerly taught at [Crowstand](#)) reported the death of two girls due to tuberculosis and believed the cause was the girls' dormitory since the boys were generally healthy.<sup>3</sup> Overcrowding meant some of the boys slept outside. In 1909, [Principal Jennie Cunningham](#) wrote letters of complaint that "for the past 2 years, 10 boys have slept in a tent both winter and summer." It would take another 2 years

before an addition was constructed. In 1912, there was a measles outbreak, and in 1916 another small pox outbreak.

In his 1922 publication (based on his 1907 report), [Dr. Peter Henderson Bryce](#) drew particular attention to the fate of 31 students who had been discharged from the File Hills school: Nine were in good health, and 22 were dead. ***Dr. Bryce stated that at File Hills, "75 percent were dead at the end of the 16 years since the school opened."***<sup>4</sup>

In 1926, 92% of the students at File Hills and Qu'Appelle tested positive for tuberculosis. By 1933, after a health unit was set up to test for TB, the percentage of students testing positive, although still very high, had dropped to below 60%. "Given these results, [Dr. R. George Ferguson](#), the director of medical services for the Saskatchewan Anti-Tuberculosis League and medical director of the Fort Qu'Appelle Sanatorium, recommended that Indian Affairs extend the unit's work to the rest of the province."<sup>5</sup> Appropriate testing policies made it possible to reduce the level of TB in residential schools. Dr. Ferguson had led Saskatchewan from the out-of-control TB epidemic in 1911, to the lowest death rate from 1921 to 1940.<sup>6</sup>

## Suicide

In her memoirs, [Eleanor Brass](#) wrote about "a boy who had hung himself for fear of discipline" at the File Hills school in the early 20th century: "The poor youth was in some kind of trouble which was not so terrible but apparently it seemed that way to him."<sup>7</sup> Brass recalled how the body of [the] boy was buried on the Peepeekisis Reserve, even though his parents lived on the Carlyle Reserve."<sup>8</sup>

[Documents from the Canada Public Archives](#) show that, in October 1939, [Kenneth Stonechild](#), a Deaf student, who repeatedly ran away, made a suicide attempt, claiming his actions were due to staff treatment: a teacher had lost patience with him and had "boxed his ears." He was also incessantly teased by older children. The doctor disputed the claim that the student attempted to commit suicide. Another student, [Reginald Keewatin](#) also attempted suicide for the same reason in November, 1939. For his punishment, he was "well spanked in the presence of an RCMP official." Both incidents were considered behavioral problems in students who were believed to be trying to discredit staff.

## Fire

Deficiencies in the fire escapes were reported in 1932. In 1942, two classroom buildings were destroyed by fire. The fire had been

<sup>1</sup> <http://thechildrenremembered.ca/school-locations/file-hill/#ftn18>

<sup>2</sup> LeBeauf, M.-E. (2011). The Role of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police During the Indian Residential Schools System, p. 383

<sup>3</sup> <http://thechildrenremembered.ca/school-locations/file-hill/#ftn18>

<sup>4</sup> <http://thechildrenremembered.ca/school-locations/file-hill/#ftn18>

<sup>5</sup> Missing Children and Unmarked Burials, Vol. 4, p. 71

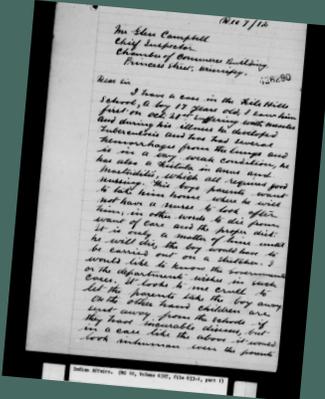
<sup>6</sup> [http://esask.uregina.ca/entry/tuberculosis\\_control.html](http://esask.uregina.ca/entry/tuberculosis_control.html)

<sup>7</sup> Missing Children and Unmarked Burials, Vol. 4, p. 3

<sup>8</sup> Missing Children and Unmarked Burials, Vol. 4, p. 120



File Hills Indian Residential School Children, ca. 1948, United Church of Canada/93.049P/1132N



**Douglas Bear's illness and his parents' struggle to bring him home.** The archived letters tell the story of a dying boy whose parents wanted to bring him home in December of 1912, but discharge was refused. After many attempts by the parents, Douglas Bear was finally returned home just three days before his death.

[Click here to read the letters.](#)



Debbie Hill, intergenerational survivor's experience



Read about Eleanor Brass's experience at File Hills (Author of *Walk in Two Worlds*)

[Read interviews with former students of File Hills in Ann Callahan's Master's Thesis, \(pp. 38 - 121\)](#)

# RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL

deliberately set by three young boys, who were taken into custody. "The local Indian Agent, M. Christianson, felt that the boys had been acting on the instruction of older boys... Five students were convicted for their role in setting the fire."<sup>9</sup> One 12-year-old boy and two 15-year-olds served their sentences in the Regina Industrial School (by then, a provincial reformatory); two 16-year-olds were sentenced to a year in the Moosomin jail. At the trial it was revealed that all the other boys at the school knew about the fire.<sup>10</sup>

### Inadequate Education

In 1940, when a Mounted Police officer tracked down Wilfred Deiter, a student who had run away from the school, "his father said he did not want the boy to return to school. According to the father, Wilfred 'gets no class work, he is doing outside work, such as hauling hay, cutting wood, and general labouring.' He felt that his son was 'receiving no better education than he would receive at home.'"<sup>11</sup> ([Read Chief Ben Pasqua's similar letter of complaint written in 1913](#))

Former student Charlie Bigknife from Starblanket Reserve, who started attending the school in the fall of 1926, said, "I learned to work after I left boarding school because in that school we went to school three hours a day so we didn't have much schooling.

I believe a lot of us today went to those boarding schools across Canada, we could've been doctors, nurses or whatever. We could've made something of ourselves but we were denied these privileges."<sup>12</sup>

### Student Death due to Negligence

On November 4, 1912 a report was made of a "sad drowning accident" involving "three little boys from 7 - 10 years of age." On November 1, the children had been playing on the bank of the lake and one of them, Archie Feather (7 years old), had a hand sleigh and was running on the thin ice quite close to shore, and he was pushed out on the ice by the other boys and he went through the ice and drowned.

The Indian agent reported: "The parents of the child feel very keenly about the matter and think there was gross carelessness on the part of those in charge of the school in allowing children of this age entrusted to their care to play near a lake, especially when the ice is just forming. The Principal tells me he warned the children in the morning and again at noon not to go on the ice." An Indian Affairs official responded: "To my mind this is a case in which it is pretty clear

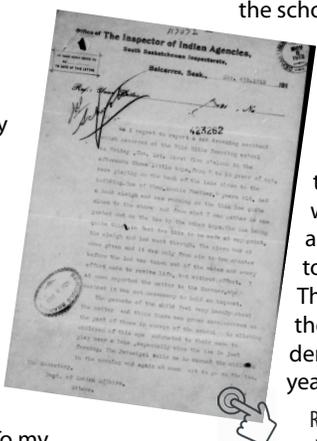
that negligence has resulted in loss of life." He determined that the school was short of staff and the grant would not be paid until there was sufficient staff at the school.<sup>13</sup> ([Read documents](#))

### Beaten to Death

In a *Globe and Mail* interview conducted in 1990, Eleanor Brass said that her friend, Cora Keewatin, had "died after being beaten across the back with a belt."<sup>14</sup> ([Read more of Eleanor Brass's story.](#))

### Poor Conditions lead to Closure

"A 1948 building inspection... reported that the school's plumbing was in poor shape, the septic tank was not functioning properly, the generator did not supply enough electricity to light the school adequately, the boilers were old, the water supply was insufficient, and only two of the seven toilets were functional. The report concluded that the building should be demolished."<sup>15</sup> The following year the school was closed.



[Read the report regarding the drowning incident.](#)

<sup>9</sup> The History, Part 2: 1939 to 2000, Vol. 1, p. 323  
<sup>10</sup> The History, Part 2: 1939 to 2000, Vol. 1, p. 323  
<sup>11</sup> The History, Part 2: 1939 to 2000, Vol. 1, p. 135

<sup>12</sup> Callahan, A. B. (2002). *On our way to Healing: Stories from the Oldest Living Generation of the File Hills Indian Residential School* (pp. 38 - 51). [Master's thesis]. University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, MB.

<sup>13</sup> Indian Affairs RG 10, Vol. 6307, file 653-1, part 1  
<sup>14</sup> [http://archives.algomau.ca/main/sites/default/files/2010-061\\_007\\_060\\_0.pdf](http://archives.algomau.ca/main/sites/default/files/2010-061_007_060_0.pdf)  
<sup>15</sup> The History, Part 2: 1939 to 2000, Vol. 1, p. 178

# FILE HILLS COLONY: A FAILED EXPERIMENT

“The construction of the colony on the Peepeekisis Reserve in southeastern Saskatchewan created one of the most oppressive and distinct colonial landscapes in North America. Founded in 1898 by Indian agent William Morris Graham, the colony was established under what Ann Laura Stoler calls an “administrative anxiety” over the “regression” of ex-pupils back to traditional ways after completing residential school. The “re-socialisation” and “re-education” of Aboriginal children was not as quick or complete as the government had envisioned. Consequently, Graham, predominantly with the collaboration of Kate Gillespie at the File Hills boarding school and Father Joseph Hugonard at the Qu’Appelle industrial school, selected “certain” ex-pupils from various reserves to be settled on subdivided land allotments on Peepeekisis and live like non-Aboriginal homestead farmers.

~C. Drew Bednasek, *Remembering the File Hills Farm Colony*



Elders and Indian soldiers in the uniform of the Canadian Expeditionary Force 4th row (l-r): David Bird, Joe McKay, Joe Peters, Ed Sanderson. 3rd row (l-r): L. Harry Stonechild, Leonard Creely, Jack Walker, Alex Brass, Ernest Goforth. 2nd row (l-r): Moostatik, Feather, William Morris Graham, Pimotat, Kee-wisk. 1st row (l-r): Jos McNab, Shavetail, Day Walker, Jack Fisher, ca. 1916-1917, Library and Archives Canada / PA-041366

The File Hills Colony was established by the local Indian Agent William Morris Graham who viewed the colony as a solution to the “problem of regression” due to the lack of opportunity after graduation from Indian Residential Schools.<sup>1</sup> “In January 1898, Graham brought the first of many graduates of the industrial schools to the Peepeekisis reserve; this placement on reserve of a non-band member marked the beginning of the File Hills Colony Scheme whereby the most promising graduates of the industrial schools would be moved to this reserve.”<sup>2</sup> The government, at this time, was realizing that their strategy

<sup>1</sup>Bednasek, C. D. (2009). Remembering the File Hills Farm Colony. *Historical Geography*, 37, 53-70  
<sup>2</sup> File Hills Colony: A Breach of Treaty, Indian Act, and Canada’s Fiduciary Responsibility. (2004, May) Landmark A Publication of the Indian Claims Commission 10(1)

to assimilate and enfranchise “Indians” through industrial schools was failing. Graduates were returning to their reserves and to their former cultures and traditions. Graham’s solution was to give graduates an opportunity for an occupation in farming by allocating farm land and offering financial assistance (and thereby continuing their “education”). However, the government was unwilling to relinquish its paternalism with regards to the First Peoples, and set up the colony with complete dependence on the Indian Agent. Edward Ahenakew, “described the File Hills Colony...as a tribute to its founder... but also a continuance of the residential school model of telling First Nations what to do.” Ahenakew’s fictional elder, Old Keyam, puts the matter this way: “I’ve read about the colony at File Hills, made up of graduates from boarding school. They are said to be doing well. I have boasted about them myself when I had nothing better to do. But they are under the guidance of an official who has more authority than most, and he is an able man whose authority these young

people accept in the way to which they become accustomed in boarding school. He is the ‘crank’ that makes the machine start and go.”<sup>3</sup>

“In 1904, three young former File Hills students, Fred Dieter [Eleanor Brass’s father], John R. Thomas, and Ben Stone Child, were reported to be farming successfully on the File Hills Colony.”<sup>4</sup> However, these were not the first farmers to be established. “Canadian government documents indicate that within six months of taking the Indian agent job at the File Hills agency in 1897, Graham had already started transferring residential school ex-pupils to Peepeekisis. ... [In] a 1902 Annual Report ... Indian Commissioner David Laird wrote that Joseph McNabb and George Little Pine had been farming under a colony scheme on Peepeekisis for some three or four years.”<sup>5</sup>

The colony did prosper for several years. In 1907, Graham, overwhelmed with what he considered the success of the colony, wrote: “Although this colony has only been in existence six years, the results obtained have been phenomenal, to my mind. I shall instance cases of young men leaving school seven years ago, at the age of 18, who are to-day settled in comfortable homes, married and have children, who are brought up as white children are, not even knowing the Indian tongue.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Ahenakew, E. (1973). *Voices of the Plains Cree* (Ed. Ruth Buck). Regina, SK: Canadian Plains Research Center, University of Regina, p. 90.  
<sup>4</sup> The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1., p. 350.  
<sup>5</sup> Bednasek, C. D. (2009). Remembering the File Hills Farm Colony. *Historical Geography*, 37, (pp. 57-58)  
<sup>6</sup>The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 660

Background Photo: File Hills Reserve Agency, ca. 1923, Canada. Dept. of Mines and Technical Surveys / Library and Archives Canada / PA-019374



File Hills Indian Colony band R-A6596 Sask Archives

The government began to encourage other schools to set up similar colonies for their graduates. In 1909, Deputy Minister Frank Pedley instructed Indian agents "wherever possible to give some assistance to discharged pupils to enable them to immediately put to practical use the instructions which they have received. You should therefore give special attention to pupils whose term of residence is nearly completed and consider each individual case according to its needs."<sup>7</sup>

By 1915, over 30 families were farming in the File Hills Colony. Interestingly, "although the colonists were selected because they had done well at residential school, they did not wish to see their own children attend residential school. They managed to win government support for the establishment of a non-religious day school on the colony, but objection from Qu'Appelle principal Joseph Hugonard led to the federal government's abandoning the initiative."<sup>8</sup>

While the official story was that File Hills Colony was a model for other schools, and a "Canadian colonial showpiece that Royalty and U.S. government officials visited to witness Canada's 'successful' management of Aboriginal peoples,"<sup>9</sup> the colony was in fact controversial. First, it was set up on Peepeekisis Reserve lands. Colonists, graduates from industrial school who were from other reserves, were relocating, taking land from original band members. In 1902, 12 square miles were subdivided for new graduates. In 1906, a second subdivision of 120 lots of 80 acres and 12 lots of 130 acres were portioned off for the colony, leaving less than 8,000 acres for the original band members, who were now a minority on their own Reserve. Between 1945 and 1956 there were ongoing complaints by original band members and at least four investigations

into band membership. A 1954 commission determined that while there was valid reason for original band members to complain, the File Hills Colonists had lived on the reserve for so long that it would be unfair to remove them. Compensation was suggested by an advisory committee, but this recommendation was not acted on by Indian Affairs. The Registrar for the commission decided a hearing would be held into the transfers of protested members. The register decided that 23 of 25 protested members should be included in the Peepeekisis Band. The decision was quickly appealed. Judge J. H. McFadden reviewed the Registrar's decision and in 1956 confirmed 23 of the protested memberships and reinstated the other two. In 1978, the Federation of Saskatchewan Indians obtained a copy of the Judge McFadden's decision and in 1986, the Peepeekisis Band submitted a specific claim to the Department of Indian Affairs, stating that the Department had caused the diminishment and alienation of the Reserve lands and the pauperization of the original band members due to negligent and improper administration of the land. In April 2001, the Peepeekisis First Nation requested an inquiry into its claim and the Commission accepted the request.<sup>10</sup>

"On May 28, 2004, the Indian Claims Commission (ICC) released its report on the Peepeekisis First Nation's File Hills Colony claim inquiry, which found that Canada had breached its lawful obligation to the First Nation. The Commission recommended that the Peepeekisis claim be accepted for negotiation under Canada's Specific Claims Policy. The federal Crown created the File Hills Colony Scheme on the Peepeekisis First Nation's Indian Reserve (IR) 81. Under this plan, young Indian men from other bands who had graduated from industrial schools were brought to the Peepeekisis reserve to live and farm. The Peepeekisis First Nation alleged that as enrollment in the farming colony increased, the original members of the First Nation were displaced from their homes and deprived of the use of the communal lands."<sup>11</sup>

Another issue was the government's

failure to give up paternalistic control and its continued assimilation strategy. Eleanor Brass wrote of rules against women visiting with each other, and against Indigenous cultural activities, such as fiddle dances, pow-wows, and tribal ceremonies—although Brass does recall attending such ceremonies conducted in secrecy. Bednasek's article, "Remembering the File Hills Farm Colony" tells the stories of Peepeekisis community members' suspicions about Graham's personal wealth coming from the labour and grain production of the colony. The stories also tell of Graham's abuse of power and his use of brutality to manage the colony, using the pass/permit system not only as a means to control, but also as a "calculated strategy to steal band members' money" (p. 61). Further, the allotted 80 acres of land was too small to become prosperous; this was done intentionally to keep the File Hills Colony farmers from competing with settler farmers.



"The Old Generation" of File Hills Reserve Agency; ca. 1914; (l-r) back row: Mrs. Keewaydin; Mrs. Jack Fisher; Mrs. Miss-ta-tik; Mrs. Buffalo Bow; Day Walker; Mrs. Yellow Belly; Mrs. Pimottatt; and Mrs. Playful Child (Tuckanow). (l-r) front row: Chief Hawke; Crooked Nose; Chief Star Blanket; Pointed Cap (Cheepoostatin); Buffalo Bow; Miss-ta-tik; and Quinness (Cree). Province of Saskatchewan Archives/RB1854



Video Resource: To Colonize a People: The File Hills Indian Farm Colony

<sup>7</sup> The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 659

<sup>8</sup> The History, Part 1 Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 660

<sup>9</sup> Bednasek, C. D. (2009). Remembering the File Hills Farm Colony. *Historical Geography* 37, 53-70

<sup>10</sup> File Hills Colony: A Breach of Treaty, Indian Act, and Canada's Fiduciary Responsibility (2004, May) Landmark A Publication of the Indian Claims Commission 10(1)

<sup>11</sup> File Hills Colony: A Breach of Treaty, Indian Act, and Canada's Fiduciary Responsibility. Landmark: A Publication of the Indian Claims Commission, 10(1), May 2004