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Samplers, Sewing and Star Quilts: Changing Federal Policies Impact Native American Education and Assimilation

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The history of education for Native American children parallels the history of federal Indian policy. In the late eighteenth century, the new republic of the United States inherited from the British responsibility for Indian tribes within its territories. Many of these tribes had fought alongside English troops during the American War for Independence, and, as defeated nations, their fate was placed in the new government's Department of War. Between 1790 and 1834 federal policies governing Indian affairs were enacted in six laws called Intercourse Acts, whose purpose was to regulate commerce and the transfer of land between citizens of the United States and members of Indian nations. Officially these laws were designed to protect Indian interests and provide for gradual assimilation into mainstream Anglo-European society. The laws were implemented and enforced, however, with varying degrees of success by a confusing array of superintendents, agents, subagents, and interpreters - supported by the United States military and the country's judicial system (Prucha 1962). A tension underlying all official interactions was tribal ownership of large tracts of land, particularly in the southern states, and the country's insatiable and undisciplined need for more land to satisfy its increasingly large, agrarian population.

The election of Andrew Jackson as President of the United States in 1829 led to significant changes in U.S. policies toward Native Americans. In his inaugural address, Jackson signaled a plan for mass removal of Indian nations to territories acquired through the Louisiana Purchase, lands that lay west of the Mississippi River. By 1830 Congress had passed the Indian Removal Act and negotiations with individual Indian nations were conducted to work out the details. One by one, major landholding Indian nations in the southeastern parts of the country were forced to exchange their traditional tribal lands for new land in "Indian Country". Continued westward expansion by white settlers resulted in repeated encroachments on these new lands, leading to more restrictive governmental policies and the establishment Indian reservations, beginning in the 1850s. Even more damaging was the Dawes Act of 1887, which prompted the break up of reservation land by allotting tracts to individuals - both Indian and non-Indian. In a constant position of "domestic dependence" on the federal government, Native peoples were unable to prevent further erosion of their rights, or control the decisions that governed the education of their children.

It wasn't until President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed John Collier as Commissioner of what is now the Bureau of Indian Affairs (1933-1945) that there was a significant challenge to the policies of forced assimilation and the emergence of what might be called cultural pluralism. This was reflected in the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, which sought to strengthen tribal structure by creating tribal governments, allowing Indians to manage their own affairs, returning lands to tribal management, enabling the development of business corporations, and establishing a revolving credit fund for land purchases and educational assistance (Adams 1995, Prucha 1970). Although there have been setbacks (particularly federal policies in the mid-1940s through the mid-1960s terminating recognition of tribal status) the policies embodied in the Indian Reorganization Act are still in force today.

Although the above review of federal policy toward Native American peoples is grossly over simplified, it is meant to serve as a foundation for understanding how changes in federal policy impacted the extent to which and the ways in which Indian children had access to education. By extension, it is designed to serve as a backdrop for a discussion on needlework instruction for Native American girls and young women, and the role of textiles in “civilizing” a minority culture whose domestic life ways were viewed at the time as uncomfortably different and morally deficient. And, in conclusion, it is designed to shed light on the role that textiles, particularly quilts, now play in promoting and celebrating tribal identity.

“Civilizing” through Education

At the beginning of the 19th century, there was no cohesive approach, and no money allocated, toward educating the children of Native American tribes living within the boundaries of the United States. To some extent, evangelical Christian missionaries of various denominations had stepped in to fill the void, but their numbers were few and their work poorly funded. It wasn’t until the Second Great Awakening in 1790, combined with a sense of nationalism following the War of 1812, that missionary religious zeal began to focus on spreading the Gospel to Indian nations. With the goal of both civilizing and Christianizing, missionaries and their families, supported financially by church-sponsored mission societies in their home states, engaged in the arduous task of establishing mission outposts in geographically dispersed locales predominantly populated by Native American families.

This effort got a financial boost after the House Committee on Indian Affairs recommended in 1818 that Congress “Put into the hands of their children the primer and the hoe, and they will naturally, in time, take hold of the plough; and as their minds become enlightened and expand, the Bible will be their book, and they will grow up in habits of morality and industry, leave the chase to those whose minds are less cultivated and become useful members of society” (Fletcher 1888). By 1819 Congress had enacted a law that established the “Civilization Fund”, appropriating an annual sum of \$10,000 to be used for instruction and education. Discretion over distribution of the money was given to the President, who was authorized to employ individuals with “good moral character” to teach reading, writing, and arithmetic to Indian children, along with instruction in appropriate agricultural practices.

Mission societies competed for these funds. Combining them with dollars donated by church members, the mission societies were able to expand the number and distribution of mission schools throughout much of the Eastern states. Locations were determined by population density, often in response to invitations from tribal leaders. Most of the schools accommodated boarders, as well as day students - although absenteeism was a common problem. In general, mission schools adopted a curriculum that replicated the education available in New England schools, with no accommodation for the fact that enrolled students were unfamiliar with both English and white middle class values. Initial instruction focused on rote learning of the alphabet; spelling by syllables; memorizing passages from a primer, the psalter, or the Bible (often without comprehension); and singing hymns. Students were also taught to write and do basic arithmetic. Considerable emphasis was placed memorizing the scriptures, personal cleanliness, and learning to be industrious. For girls, this meant instruction in needlework skills, plain and fancy.

Integrated into the daily schedule for girls was time for sewing, as well as other domestic activities. In a manner that replicated needlework instruction for non-Indian girls across the country, lessons culminated in the creation of a sampler. Samplers had been used for generations to document that girls could stitch their alphabets (a skill designed to enable marking initials on household linens and clothing), as well as demonstrate competence with a variety of stitches, patterns, and decorative motifs.

Samplers in the English tradition often also included an aphorism, Bible verse, or hymn - as well as the maker's name and date of completion (Anderson 2011; Edmonds 1991). Described below are two of the ten known samplers stitched at mission schools by Native American girls.

Eliza Baynard, Cherokee Nation. As early the 18th century, Cherokee leaders decided it was in their own self-interest to adopt certain aspects of white civilization, and by extension Anglo-European education. In 1817 the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions established the Valley Towns Mission School in the Cherokee Nation near Peachtree, North Carolina under the leadership of Humphrey Posey. The school did not thrive, however, until missionary Evan Jones took over leadership in 1821. The school lasted until 1837, at which time all the Cherokee were forcibly removed to lands west of the Mississippi. Evan Jones, along with his son John B. Jones, went westward to Oklahoma with them (McLoughlin 1990).



Figure 1. Sampler by Eliza Baynard, c. 1824 Cherokee Nation. 7.5" H x 6.75" W. Photo courtesy of Bill Subjack. Museum of Early Southern Decorative Art (MESDA).

Eliza Baynard's silk on linen sampler (Figure 1) measures only 7.5 by 6.75 inches and is finished with a yellow ribbon border. Within a serpentine floral vine Eliza stitched a short verse from Psalm 41: "Blessed is he that considereth the poor". The sampler is signed *Eliza Baynard Valley Towns Mission School Cherokee Nation*, but unfortunately her Indian name is unknown. It was common practice to provide all mission students with a Christian name, usually one honoring a person who had donated to the school. "Beneficiary naming" was a strategy for financing the work of a mission – for a stipulated sum of money per year, an Indian child would be given the name of the benefactor. The donor might receive a brief letter of appreciation each year or something created by the student (Berkhofer 1972). Research documents that samplers stitched at British mission schools in Africa were sent as souvenirs to the school's financial backers to encourage their continued support and provide tangible evidence that

their donations had been put to good use (Strickrodt 2010). This is undoubtedly what prompted Eliza Baynard to stitch her small sampler. Although the sampler is undated, it was most likely stitched in 1824 prior to Evan Jones' trip to Baltimore with a delegation of Indians to support fundraising efforts at the Baptist church in that city. The secretary of the church was named Eliza Baynard and it was she who had coordinated local fund raising for Valley Towns Mission School, resulting in annual contributions totaling \$100 (McLoughlin 1990). This is undoubtedly the Eliza Baynard for whom the young samplermaker was named. The sampler descended in the Baynard family until it was sold at a Baltimore estate sale. It is now in the collection of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Art in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Christeen Baker, Choctaw Nation. The Mayhew Mission near Boswell, Mississippi was established in 1820 by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. It opened with twelve students on April 30 of that year under the leadership of Cyrus Kingsbury. The American Board was a large-scale organization run primarily by the Congregationalists and Presbyterians, and Kingsbury was responsible for establishing a network of mission schools along the Tennessee-Georgia boundary (Bowden 1981). The Mayhew School grew rapidly, resulting in the founding of at least six additional schools in the Choctaw Nation, largely staffed by female white teachers from New England. In 1825 Congress allocated an annual sum of \$6000 to the Choctaw Nation for educational purposes – provided to them in lieu of direct payment for land they had ceded to the government. Contracts by the Choctaw Nation with the American Board, and later with the Presbyterian Board, document that these funds were used to finance the mission schools in Mississippi, supplemented by funds from the mission boards.

In addition to reading, writing and arithmetic, the curriculum for girls included housekeeping, sewing, knitting, weaving, as well as butter and cheese making (Johnson 2011). Christeen Baker enrolled in the Mayhew Mission School in 1829 at the age of 12 and was almost certainly renamed for Christine Baker, a philanthropic woman in Boston who sent annual gifts of food, clothing, and money to the school. Reports to the American Board at the end of 1830 indicate thirteen-year-old Christeen was learning to read and write, and was mastering the basics of geography.¹ In 1830 Christeen completed a silk on linen sampler that documented she was also learning to sew and embroider (Figure 2). Included within a sawtooth and bead-like border are two stitched alphabets and the numbers 1-9, plus 0. Immediately below is a verse from the Bible, Ecclesiastes 9:10. In the lower half of her sampler Christeen stitched two slightly modified stanzas of a five-stanza verse composed by three anonymous Native American students at Dartmouth and sung “beneath an enchanting bower” next to a “youthful pine” at the time of their graduation (Leming 1829)²

*When shall we all meet again
When shall we all meet again
Oft shall glowing hope expire
Oft shall wried [sic] love retire
Oft shall death and sorrow reign
Ere we all shall meet again*

¹ Letters and annual reports (1810-1862) pertaining to the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions and its Choctaw missions are archived in the Houghton Library of Harvard University in Cambridge, MA.

² Leonard Deming was a Boston publisher from at least 1829 to 1837 who advertized that he had for sale the largest and best assortment of ballads and songs to be found in New England. Presumably someone from the Boston-based American Board of Foreign Missions sent a copy of the publication to a teacher at the Mayhew Mission. Or it may have been published in other venues at earlier dates.

*When the dreames [sic] of life are fled
When its wasted lamp is dead
When in cold oblivion's shade
Beauty power and fame are laid
Where immortal spirits reign
There may we all meet again.*

Christeen signed her work: *Wrought by Christeen Baker Choctaw Mission school Mayhew June 9th 1830.*

A little more than three months after the completion of her sampler, members of the Choctaw Nation were forced to cede all of their land in Mississippi to the United States in exchange for land west of the Mississippi River. Ratified in 1831, the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek led to the mid-winter mass removal of 17,000 Choctaw men, women, and children over the 500 mile "Trail of Tears", along which as many as 6000 may have perished from exposure, disease, and starvation. Although a provision in the treaty allowed Indians to stay in Mississippi and become citizens of the United States, most chose to move with the Choctaw Nation. Christeen Baker's fate is unknown,



**Figure 2. Sampler by Christeen Baker, 1830, Choctaw Nation. 16.25" H x 11.5" W.
Photo courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.**

Eradicating Tribal Identity

Models for educating Native American children evolved over time, but were incremental in implementation – meaning new approaches reflecting new federal policies were launched, but schools following earlier models remained in operation, albeit less well funded. In addition to the mission schools described above, there were at least three different federally supported models in operation during the last half of the 19th century: (a) reservation day school, (b) reservation boarding school, and (c) off-reservation boarding school. From the point of view of assimilation, government agents soon found the reservation day schools to be inadequate – daily contact with parents and village life resulted in unlearning the “civilizing” lessons of personal cleanliness, academic achievement, and industrious responsibility toward work. By the 1870s, reservation boarding schools, located at agency headquarters, had been adopted as the optimal solution – far enough removed from tribal influences, but close enough that students could return to families for vacations and summer months. It wasn’t long, however, before the disadvantages of this model also began to emerge. Reservation officials reported that visits by tribal members retarded students’ progress in speaking English; ceremonies and the rhythms of tribal life interfered with school attendance and attention; and ration day (distribution of federal food allotments) required school to be dismissed altogether (Adams 1995). It was felt these interactions slowed student progress toward assimilation, and delayed the eradication of student attachment to tribal ways.



Figure 3. A 15-year old Sioux girl named Ziewie and her sewing.

The photo was taken in 1879 at the Hampton Institute, four months after her arrival from Crow Creek Agency. Hampton University’s Archives and Museum Collection.

In 1879, Captain Richard Henry Pratt, building on his success in civilizing Indian prisoners from Fort Sill, opened Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania. Under his leadership, Carlisle became the prototype of off-reservation boarding schools – a concerted effort to educate Indian children far from their native reservations and tribal influences. Pratt favored rapid and absolute assimilation, and believed the only way that was possible was to cut all ties with native society. Between 1879 and 1902 twenty-five off reservation boarding schools were opened, all educating students from a mix of tribes and all heavily

regimented as to curriculum and behavior. Although a highly militarized, heavily disciplinary view of education was not new to American society (Koganzon 2012), its implementation at off-reservation boarding schools was in sharp contrast to students' cultural upbringing and educational norms for non-Indians.

Off-reservation boarding schools provided basic instruction in the English language, literacy and mathematics, but it was their focus on education for self-reliance that took precedence. Students spent half of every day learning industrial skills or performing manual labor. For female students, instruction focused on the “domestic sciences” – laundry, cleaning, cooking, and of course, sewing (Trennert 1982) (Figure 3).

Over time, student labor became essential for operating the school, and institutional self-sufficiency became more important than the educational relevance of the work. Thus, even young girls were consigned to months or years of washing, ironing, sewing, and darning – long after the tasks had any redeeming educational value (Adams 1995). Even though the Superintendent of Indian Education expressed concern in 1895 that industrial education had turned into mere drudgery, the practice continued well into the 1920s. For example, in 1924 students in the sewing room at Chilocco, Oklahoma turned 24,902 yards of cloth (muslin, sateen, gingham, toweling, flannel, linen ticking, denim and hickory) into more than 7600 objects: 505 aprons (printer, bakery, kitchen, carpenter etc.), 85 brassieres, 608 pillow cases, 755 high gowns, 632 shirts, blouses, and nightshirts, 3071 sheets, 436 underskirts, 1430 dresses, 75 skirts, plus untold quantities of towels, table covers, linens, scarves, and two piano covers³ (Figure 4).



***Figure 4. The sewing room at an unidentified off-reservation boarding school.
National Archives and Records Administration,
Bureau of Indian Affairs NRIS-75-PAOLAVATTA-CARL48***

³ Cited in Lomawaima 1994, page 84.

Enforced domestic labor was standard for girls attending off-reservation boarding schools, and similar examples of mass production from the sewing room can be found in many school records. These practices are in sharp contrast to the curriculum at boarding schools for non-Indian girls – where student labor was not a requirement for institutional self-sufficiency. It also represents a significant shift in educational philosophy – away from providing Indian girls with sewing instruction reflecting mainstream values and techniques (as in the teaching of samplers at mission schools) and toward a more racially constructed goal of sewing instruction for domestic servitude.

Educating for Cultural Pluralism

Prompted by outspoken reformers such as John Collier, the federal government sponsored a study examining its policies toward Native Americans. In January 1928 the Miriam Report was presented, and it had scathing criticism for the boarding school system, then responsible for educating nearly 80% of all Indian children. Called out for special condemnation were the overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, inadequate nutrition, extreme “routinization,” and pernicious system of student labor that threatened to violate state child labor laws and trained students for jobs that were either low paying or disappearing from the economic mainstream (Adams 1995, Szaz 1974).

The report also recommended an educational “New Deal” for Indian children: (a) students should be educated close to their families whenever possible (in reservation day schools and local public schools); (b) educational methods should adapt to individual abilities, interests, and needs; and (c) teachers should use materials that build on concepts students would find culturally familiar. Although it was understood that boarding schools would continue to play a role for some time, particularly at the secondary level, the report recommended they be more closely aligned with public schools and adopt a curriculum that enabled preparation for college. And in the future, government policy “must give consideration to the desires of the individual Indians” – supporting personal choices about whether and when to enter mainstream society or retain tribal ways (Adams 1995).

Symbolic of this new cultural pluralism is the widespread adaptation of western quilting techniques and patterns to tribal motifs, values, and ceremonies. Originally introduced by missionaries, quilting and the making of quilts pieced from colorful fabric became an integral part of 19th century Native American culture. The resulting textiles were highly valued and gradually took on meanings and functions specific to tribal communities (MacDowell 1997). In addition to use as bedcovers, quilts are given away at events such as naming ceremonies, graduations, memorial giveaways, and even basketball games. Quilts are used to depict tribal history, are featured in fundraisers and powwows, and are draped over caskets and sweat lodges. Specific quilt patterns became imbued with symbolic meaning and used to convey a sense of tribal identity and cultural continuity.

For the Sioux and other tribes of the northern plains, a quilt featuring a large, centrally positioned eight-point star came to reflect and represent their cultural heritage. Adopted because it symbolizes the all-important morning star (a traditional tribal motif originally depicted on buffalo robes, hide paintings, and clothing), the Star Quilt has become one of the most widely adopted quilt patterns. Although its popularity waned in the 1920s and 30s, the Star Quilt reappeared in the early 1960s as part of an indigenous cultural renaissance. In its many variations, often in combination with other tribal motifs, the Star Quilt has come to symbolize the celebration of Indian culture (Pulford 1989). And its central motif, a vibrant, multi-colored star, is used as a symbol of native pride – appearing on contemporary ceremonial clothing and dance regalia.

Evidence of the star motif's importance as a stand-in for Native American heritage can be found in arenas beyond the personal and ceremonial. Educators Davison and Miller (1998), for example, encourage the use of culturally relevant activities to enhance the scientific and mathematical understanding of Indian students. To illustrate, they discuss the mathematical properties inherent in geometrically complex Star Quilts and recommend instructional practices that link the school's approach to science and math with evidence of informal science and math understanding in students' own cultures. Culturally relevant instruction, first advocated by the Miriam Report in 1928, is a significant step toward celebrating cultural diversity and promoting social justice.

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