

Testimony of Chief Brian Harris on Behalf of the Catawba Nation
House Appropriations Committee
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
Public Witness Day – May 7, 2024

I am here today to shed light on a deeply troubling chapter in our nation's history, one that demands acknowledgment, accountability, and, above all, justice. The tragic saga of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School represents a dark stain on the fabric of our collective past, a reminder of the profound injustices inflicted upon Indigenous peoples in the name of assimilation and cultural erasure. The requests I am making today would impact the National Park Service and the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

This issue holds significant personal meaning for both the Catawba Nation in South Carolina and the family of Wade Ayres. Wade, a 13-year-old from the Catawba Nation, was enrolled at Carlisle in 1903. Tragically, just four and a half months later, he passed away due to complications arising from a vaccine administered during his time at the school. Wade's remains are among those that appear to have been improperly designated, a consequence of apparent mismanagement of the cemetery over the years. This mismanagement notably occurred in 1927 when the U.S. Army relocated the graves of Native American children at Carlisle to accommodate development near the barracks entrance.

Between 1880 and 1910, nearly 200 Native American children lost their lives while under the care of the government's flagship Indian boarding school, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Founded in 1879 at the Army's Carlisle Barracks, this institution operated under the chilling motto of "kill the Indian, save the man," seeking to forcibly assimilate over 7,800 Native American children from more than 140 tribal nations through a coercive blend of Western-style education and harsh labor.

The toll of this cruel experiment was measured in lives lost and dreams shattered. At least 194 Indigenous children were laid to rest in the school cemetery, their final resting places marked by simple graves, with 14 bearing the heartbreaking inscription of "unknown." Many of these young souls succumbed to illness, their deaths documented in local newspapers of the time, citing causes such as tuberculosis or unknown sickness.

The story of Wade Ayers and the 193 other children who remain lost to history illustrates the level of disrespect that federal institutions have historically shown to Native peoples and Native values. Here are several programs this Committee should support that represent important opportunities to support our efforts to protect our culture and heritage:

- I urge at least \$40 Million for the National Park Service's Tribal Historic Preservation Program. Pursuant to the National Historic Preservation Act, Tribal Nations establish their own tribal historic preservation offices to protect tribal lands and sacred sites. These offices receive funding from the NPS, but that funding has been flatlined for years, even as the number of THPO's has grown. THPOs are the frontline of our efforts to preserve tribal sacred and cultural sites, as well as our representatives in many inter-governmental discussions that impact tribal cultural heritage, including repatriation as in the case of Wade Ayers, as well as working with museums and research centers.

- I urge at least \$1.5 Million for Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) Enforcement. This committee's support for dedicated NAGPRA enforcement funding in recent years has directly contributed to more effective law enforcement to protect this important tribal cultural patrimony.
- I urge at least \$1 Million for Funding Implementation of the Safeguard Tribal Objects of Patrimony (STOP) Act. This law, passed in the last Congress, will assure the protection of many sensitive tribal items from illegal export. It is important to put in place the necessary resources in the federal government to enable this law to be implemented effectively and quickly.
- I also urge you to work with your colleagues to direct the Army Corps of Engineers to allow tribes, in addition to families, to petition for the return of remains. Historically only living relatives of those buried in the cemetery have been allowed to pursue the return of remains. This policy is flawed for many reasons in that relatives may not be aware of the remains, that there is a possibility to request repatriation, or have the technical expertise to pursue such options. Further, tribes as political bodies and governments should be able to petition the return of their citizens' remains.

As the Army persists in its endeavors to identify and repatriate the remaining children in Pennsylvania, it is imperative that tribal nations are treated with the respect, dignity, and sovereignty they rightly deserve. Throughout this undertaking, it is essential to ensure that the Department of the Interior is actively involved, especially concerning the implementation of NAGPRA. The funding I have just outlined will contribute to achieving this objective.

Clean Water Project

Mr. Chairman and esteemed members of the subcommittee, I would like to address one additional matter. The Catawba Nation has recently submitted a request for Congressionally Directed Spending through the office of Senator Graham. This funding is intended to support a clean water project aimed at facilitating the construction of a new school and much-needed housing on our reservation. We believe that this project will also have positive implications for our municipal neighbor, the City of Rock Hill. Therefore, I respectfully urge the members of this subcommittee to consider accepting this request from the Senate should it be presented to you during the FY 2025 appropriations process.

Hawu, thank you.