

Ponemah Land of the Hereafter

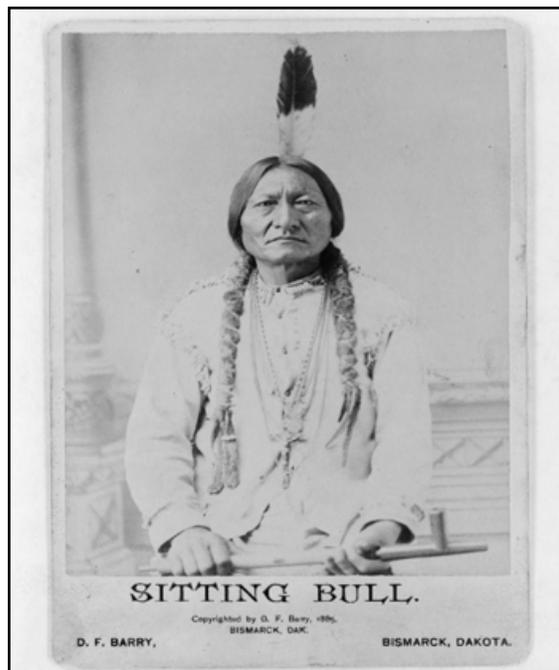
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The Spring 2009 issue of the Quarterly included an article about Bertha Golder Kirkner that made a passing reference to an Indian School in Strafford. This article about that school is reprinted from the Quarterly, Volume 25, #1, originally published in January 1987.

It was to visit their niece that the celebrated Indian Chief Sitting Bull, the Sioux leader who had defeated General George Custer at the Battle of Little Bighorn in 1876, and Mrs. Bull came to this area early in October of 1884, resplendent in scarlet blankets and leggings. With several performers from their traveling Wild West show, they arrived by special train at the Wayne station, where they were greeted by Mrs. Bull's niece and the other students of the Indian School located in the building of the old Spread Eagle tavern in Strafford. From the station they were escorted to the school, a mile and a half or so away.

During their visit they were given front row seats for an exhibition of the students' accomplishments and progress. Sitting Bull, it was reported, was "especially interested in watching the children write." Several songs were also sung by the pupils, which, it was noted in the newspaper accounts of the visit, "proved very opportune, as they prevented Bull from taking a nap!" Following the program a special dinner, prepared by the Siouan pupils, was served, after which each chief was presented a handsome brier-root pipe and some tobacco. "In two minutes after they had lit their pipes," it was also reported, "the room was almost black with smoke. Long Dog," it was added, "has a way of letting smoke out of his mouth at the rate of four cubic feet a minute."

The Indian School at Strafford was more formally the summer campus of the Lincoln Institution, located at



1885 portrait of Chief Sitting Bull, by photographer David F. Barry. *Courtesy Library of Congress.*

324 S. 11th street in Philadelphia. The Institution had been founded on April 1, 1866 by Mary McHenry Cox, the wife of John Bellangee Cox, a prominent Philadelphia attorney, and incorporated on May 9th of that year as a school for orphan children of soldiers who had lost their lives during the Civil War. With the passing years, however, these soldiers' orphans became too old to need the type of instruction and care provided by the Institution, and in 1883 it became a school for young children from various American Indian tribes.

The idea of special schools in the East for the education of the Indians was still a relatively new one. The famed Carlisle Indian School, for example, had been founded only four years earlier, in 1879. "The Gov-

ernment has opened schools on the reservations," it was pointed out in a report of the Lincoln Institution a few years later, "and Missionaries have gone out to them, but this does not answer the need. Their reservations are [still] all Indian. They breathe the vitiated atmosphere of the forefathers whose rites they follow, while our strong hand withholds from them participation in our wider life. Their book education is to them a verbal form; it cannot reach the heart or mould the spirit. Suppose the children of our large families were inexorably sequestered in their homes: does not the imagination shrink from the dwarfed and blighted results? ... To effectually [sic] civilize the Indian ... he should be subjected to the broadest cosmopolitan influences." The aim of the school was, in short, to teach these children both "the duties of civilization and the beauties of religion."

In its first year as an Indian School, only Indian girls attended the Lincoln Institution. On September 8, 1883 the first group arrived, all from the Sioux nation, members of the Brule, Hajaja and Santee bands.

The next arrivals, two and a half months later on November 24, were from the Chippewa and Ojibway nations. By the following spring there were 84 girls at the school, from fourteen different nations from New York to California - the Sioux, Chippewa, Ojibway, Santee, Osage, Omaha, Pawnee, Navajo, Cheyenne, Miami, Modoc, Wichita, Mohawk, and Oneida nations - with more than twenty bands represented. Two nations, the Sioux and the Chippewa, however, accounted for more than half of the pupils.

While they ranged in age from seven to eighteen, most of them were between the ages of ten and fourteen. At the school the girls were given first names, with their last names or surnames in many cases simply a translation of their Indian names. Thus Stawakema, for example, became Maud Echo Hawk; Pawshehe was known as Prudy Eagle Feather; Omushkassipaw as June Big Bird; and Tonyanke-was'tavin became Ellen Man Chief. The students were described as being ambitious in their studies and quick to learn. "They are remarkably intelligent," it was noted in a contemporary newspaper report, "and

rapidly acquire a knowledge of reading, penmanship, and music, many of them within a month, learning to speak English fluently, draw maps neatly, write correct compositions and play well upon the cabinet organ." The girls also all had lessons in vocal music, in which they showed "much interest and talent." Half the day was spent attending these classes, and during the other half of the day the girls received instruction in housework and sewing.



The Spread Eagle Tavern, in an undated photo from the Society archives. *Photographer unknown.*

Their uniforms were blue gingham dresses with white collars. Their hair was cut in straight bangs in the front, and braided in back. As the girls' first summer at the school approached, the managers of the Institution became concerned about the effect of the hot summer in Philadelphia on the Indian children and that it might prove disastrous for some of them. Within a few miles of the summer residence of Mrs. Cox at "Ivycroft," north of Wayne in Tredyffrin Township, was the 100-year old Spread Eagle Tavern, just over the county line in Radnor Township. No longer being used and beginning to show signs of deterioration, it had recently been purchased by George W. Childs, allegedly to prevent anyone else from buying it and obtaining a license to sell liquor in an inn so close to his new development in Wayne. Through his generosity, it became, with no charge for rental, the



Students and teachers pose outside the school at the former Spread Eagle Tavern, October 1884. *Photographer unknown. Image from <http://www.thomaskinkadechico.com/bertha.htm>.*

summer location of the Indian School for the next two summers.

Considerable work was needed to refurbish the picturesque old stone inn and make it habitable and usable as a school. New flooring, plastering and painting were needed, as well as the replacement of broken windows and repair of other damage. The work was started in April 1884 and, under the personal supervision of Mrs. Cox, was completed by the end of May. In the West Chester Daily Local News for June 2 it was noted "The woodwork inside and out was freshly painted, the walls neatly whitewashed and the surrounding grounds fixed up and cleared of the rubbish that had accumulated. As yet only such furniture as was found absolutely necessary has been sent out from the house on South Eleventh Street, but the dormitories, school room, dining room, work room, etc. are fresh and bright and clean. The porches on the ground floor and second floor are protected by railings, but on the grounds attached to the old hostel-

ry there is ample room for the girls to play ... The principal room on the ground floor of the old hotel, the bar, is now used as the dining room."

"Adjoining it are the kitchen, very much improved and furnished with all the necessary conveniences for preparing food for so large a household; the officers' dining-room, and across the hall, a parlor and music room. The rooms on the second and third floors are divided off into dormitories, infirmary, [and] apartments for the house-mother and matron. The school-room, on the third floor, is a light, cheerful room, and thoroughly adapted to its purpose."

In the school room, long boards on trestles served as desks, and the room was well equipped with maps, globes, and books. A flower garden was planted next to the dining room, and beyond it was a truck patch for raising the vegetables needed for the kitchen. Outside the old kitchen was a large canvas tent, used on very warm days as a laundry. The building was also

surrounded by a neat fence, "to keep out too inquisitive intruders."

On May 29th the 84 pupils were moved to Strafford, with the expectation that with additional arrivals the enrollment would soon be 100. There were also ten officers and two teachers, Miss A. F. Allen, formerly of Lewistown, and Mrs. Mary G. Waters, a daughter of a former U.S. Senator from Virginia, the Hon. J. S. Carlisle. Dr. Joseph Egbert, of Wayne, offered his services as school physician, while the Rev. Joseph L. Miller, of Mt. Airy, was elected chaplain and lived at the school.

Housework at the school was for the most part done by the Indian girls themselves, as they were taught how to cook and sweep and wash, as well as how to sew, and cut out and make their own clothing.

Church services for the students, most of whom had been baptized into the Episcopal Church, were held at the Lyceum Hall in Wayne. (It too was made available to the school on Sundays and for special occasions through the generosity of Mr. Childs).

Three days after their arrival in their summer location, the girls took part in their first service at the Hall, which had been converted "into quite a pretty chapel" by gifts from various people interested in "this branch of the work of civilizing and improving the condition of the Indians." The Whitsunday service was conducted by the Rev. Miller, and included the Morning Prayer and celebration of the Holy Communion, the children reciting the creed and responsive portions and taking part "audibly and reverently." The choir, under the direction of Mrs. Walters, was made up of pupils from the school, and it was noted that their singing was "remarkably sweet and touching" as they sang chants, hymns, kyries, and responses "as well as any equal number of children who had been familiar with the music of the Church all their lives would have done."

In addition to the morning service each Sunday, in the afternoon the pupils attended Sunday School, and at five o'clock Evening Prayer was read. In his Wayside Inns on Lancaster Turnpike, the local historian Julius F. Sasche observed, "It was a beautiful, yet strange spectacle to see these dusky maidens, descendants of the aborigines, going two by two, from their services, as they trudged along the smooth white turnpike, sober and demure with their prayer book

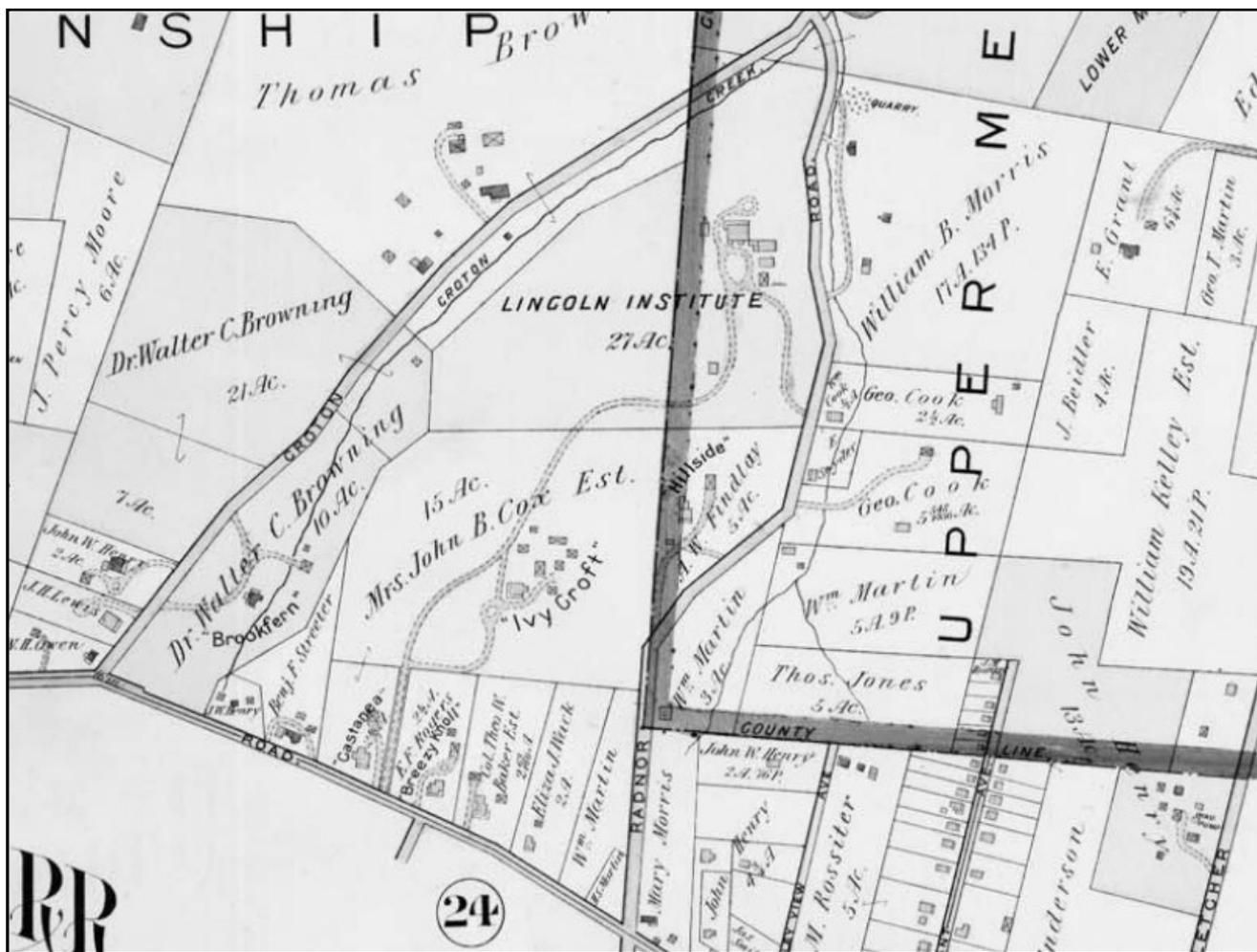
and hymnal in their hands; where but a little over two centuries ago their people had roamed and hunted free and undisturbed by anything approaching civilization, as monarchs of these glorious hills and valleys."

Later in June a group of eighteen girls and their two teachers went by train to West Chester, to be entertained at the home of the Hon. Washington Townsend and Mrs. Townsend, before taking part in a program given in the evening at the Methodist Episcopal Church in West Chester in behalf of their race. In the afternoon the girls played various simple games on the lawn with some of the local young ladies, and the whole occasion, it was reported in the Local, "was freighted with much genuine interest" and provided "much merriment."

The Fourth of July was enjoyed at the lake in Hammer Hollow. (In the Local it was ironically observed that these "first Americans [were] celebrating the independence of the second Americans" while "their parents [are] under guard of rifles in a few thousand acres of Western land"!) One of the features of their first summer in the country, apart from the visit of Sitting Bull, was an entertainment the pupils gave in September at the Wayne Hall, a series of twenty-two tableaux illustrating Longfellow's "Hiawatha." As the Rev. Miller narrated portions of the poem, the children, dressed in their native costume, depicted various scenes, such as "The Indian Home," "Hunting," "Ambush," and "Lover's Advent," among others. The program ended with "Wedding Feast," a tableau that included a wedding song, a wedding dance, and, finally, a hymn sung in the Dakota language.

After the winter term in Philadelphia, the pupils again returned to the old Spread Eagle tavern site for the summer of 1885. After several unsuccessful attempts by the managers of the Lincoln Institution to buy the property, for the next summer a ten-acre tract near "Ivycroft," Mrs. Cox's summer home, was purchased for a permanent summer location. The purchase was made on January 5, 1886 from Henry Martin and others, and the site was located north of Upper Gulph Road and to the west of Croton Road, partly in Tredyffrin Township and partly in Upper Merion.

A large two-story frame building, 102 feet long and 45 feet wide, with a chapel attached, was built at the new location. The preparatory work on the land was



This image from the 1908 Mueller Main Line Atlas shows “Ivycroft”, the estate of Mrs. Cox, and the adjoining property that housed the Indian school. The school property spanned the border between Tredyffrin and Upper Merion.

Franklin Maps, at AndysAntiqueAtlases.com.

done by the Indian boys -- boys as well as girls had been admitted to the school after the first year -- and several of them also assisted in the masonry and carpentry work. The builder was William Martin. (The building itself was located on the Upper Merion portion of the property, with the entrance from Radnor Street Road). It was completed in early August.

The new summer school was given the name "Ponemah", which means the "Land of the Hereafter." On August 3d it was occupied by about 100 girls, who stayed there until October 31st.

A description of the school, by a Carla Troon, a resident of Berwyn, who visited it in October, appeared in a letter she wrote to the Editor of the Local. "About four miles from Berwyn," she noted, "and scarce a mile north of the Eagle station ... somewhat removed

from the high road and nestling in what is now a perfect bower of autumn beauty, is the summer home for the Indian children of the Philadelphia Indian school. ... [The dormitories] were wide, cool, and spotlessly clean. Each had its showy counterpane and lace-edged sham. And from the many dormer windows in the long, sloping roofs there are such beautiful far-reaching views of wood-crowned hills and shadowy vales that involuntarily the heart says slowly, reverently, 'How wonderful are thy works, Oh Lord!' But our party was waiting and we again descended to the first floor. Walking along the wide porches -- there are wide porches everywhere about the building -- we caught glimpses of the dining room where the long tables were spread in snowy linen and at each plate were glass and napkin and saucer heaped with clusters of purple grapes. And the dusky children were very, very happy..."

(There were others in the area, however, who were less enthusiastic about the presence of the "savages" in their midst, concerned that they might trespass on their property or steal their fruit or other produce from their gardens. But there is no indication that any such depredations ever took place. In another account the girls were described as "industrious," but the boys were "said to be rather indolent.") In September the girls at Ponemah held what they called a Walwicayapl, an Indian name for a feast. The party was well attended, and more than \$500 was raised. The money was used for improvements to the heating apparatus in the boys department.

The annual costs of operating the Indian Department of the Lincoln Institution were about \$35,000, of which more than 95 per cent was received in U.S. warrants for the support and tuition of the girls and boys. The school also received miscellaneous donations each year: cloth and material for the sewing room, medicines, fancy fruits for the Christmas party, and also cash donations (most of them five dollars each) for the scholarship funds.

By the end of the third year, the total Indian enrollment at the Institution was 194, 101 girls and 93 boys, representing fourteen different nations. "In the Education Department," it was noted in the 1887 annual report of the Board of Managers, "the advancement has been steady and satisfactory. Thirty-two girls and three boys attend the Public Schools.

They receive excellent reports and are highly spoken of by the teachers. The people learn quickly and apply themselves with diligence and interest in their studies. The girls do all the household work under a proper superintendent in each department. They make their own clothing, knit stockings both by hand and by machine, and do useful wool work. The boys are learning various trades and methods of farming... Eight boys have occupations in shops and offices in the city, returning home at night.

During the summer months thirty-five girls and twenty boys were satisfactorily employed on farms and in families. One girl is now studying at the training School of the University Hospital, and promises "to become a good nurse." (In the previous year's annual report it had been noted that the boys that were "put out" with local families engaged in painting, glazing, and farm work, doing "as good [a] day's labor as the

white man," while the girls baked, sewed, washed, ironed, and were "competent in all household departments." It was also observed that "Numerous country families gladly testify to these facts.")

It was also noted in the 1887 report that the general health of the Indian children had improved since the previous report and that those who had been at the school since it opened "show the benefit derived from contact with civilized life."

The Indian girls at the Lincoln Institution continued to return to Ponemah each summer up into the first decade of this century. When subsidies for the Indian children were discontinued by the government, the program was supported largely through the donations and contributions of Mrs. Cox. In addition to the original large frame building, several smaller structures were added to the school's summer facilities, and in 1890 and 1903 a total of ten more acres in Tredyffrin was added to the site.

After the Indian Department was discontinued in the early 1900s, the primary efforts of the Lincoln Institution were directed to homeless orphan boys between the ages of five and fourteen and coming from poor environments. In a plea for contributions in 1914, however, it was pointed out, "Our country building is nearly thirty years old, no repairs having been made in years. The plumbing is out of date, and unsanitary, and we are in immediate need of new plumbing and repairs. Unless these can be made, the children may have to stay in the city during the hot summer months." In October of the following year the Lincoln Institution was merged with the Educational Home organization, and in November of 1922 they were both merged with the Big Brothers Association. The property in Tredyffrin was sold on June 22, 1924 to Emily Exley.

But for about twenty years Ponemah was the summer location of the Indian School of the Lincoln Institution, where each year a hundred or so young Indian girls were taught to read and write and given skills in music and in the practical arts. After the prescribed five-year course, many of them returned to their native homes and became teachers there for their own people.