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ABSTRACT

This paper documents a single year in the history of Navajo education from the perspective of the Navajo Agent Dennis Matthew Riordan. It draws on Riordan's correspondence, 1882-83, with the Secretary of the Interior, with Captain Richard Henry Pratt at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, and with his brother. In December 1882, Riordan arrived in Fort Defiance, Arizona, from Ohio to assume the post of Agent to the Navajo. In his first letter to the Secretary of the Interior, Riordan deploras the conditions of the school, and as the year continues, he writes of his efforts to maintain sod buildings; rebuild the school; provide water by building a dam, flume, and storage tank; obtain funds to feed the teachers and students; and combat crime. Riordan rebuilt the school and traveled to Hampton Institute in Virginia and to Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, where he recruited the first Native American teachers for the Ft. Defiance school. Their employment was terminated less than a year later, due largely to the "surrounding circumstances." Riordan's letters poignantly depict his struggles to make living and schooling conditions a little better for the Indians in his Agency, his views on the benefits of education in terms of acculturation and modernization, and his frustrations with the unresponsive bureaucrats in Washington. (SV)

**NO ONE REMEMBERS A WINTER LIKE
THIS: A YEAR AT THE NAVAJO AGENCY
1882-1883**

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No One Remembers a Winter Like This: A Year at the Navajo Agency 1882-1883

We need not carry the guilt of yesterday's mistakes, only the responsibility to
rectify them. (Ann Nolan Clark, 1969 p.100)

This paper will document a single year in the history of Navajo education from the perspective of the Navajo Agent Dennis Matthew Riordan through Riordan's correspondence with the Secretary of the Interior and with Captain Richard Henry Pratt at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School and with his brother. D.M. Riordan's letters have been reproduced both from the faint ink of the Agency letterbook at the Arizona Historical Society in Tucson: the clearer ink of the individually folded and numbered letters from the Bureau of Indian Affairs Letters Received 1881-1907 at the National Archives in Washington DC, and from Riordan's personal correspondence in the Blanche Riordan collection at Northern Arizona University.

In December 1882 D.M. Riordan, a civil war veteran, arrived in Ft. Defiance, Arizona from Ohio to assume the post of Agent to the Navajo. From his first letter to the Secretary of the Interior dated December 21, 1882, "At the risk of being considered

premature, I would beg to submit to the Honorable Commissioner some of my observations while at the Agency. The schoolhouse in its present unfinished condition is very nearly a disgrace. The snow which has fallen to the depth of 4 or 6 inches in melting drips through on to the floor of the kitchen and dining room". On January 3, 1883, Riordan continues, "As for the school, I believe I said to you already it was very nearly a disgrace. I now say it is a disgrace, without any qualifications or mental reservations whatever." As the year continues, Riordan writes of his efforts to maintain the sod buildings, to provide water, and to combat crime. He asks for materials to rebuild the schoolhouse, for mule collars, for funds to feed the teachers and students, and for labor to harness the creek for irrigation.

In 1864, a generation before Riordan's appointment, the Navajo people had been relocated to Fort Sumner in eastern New Mexico. There they signed the Treaty of 1868 which guaranteed them with funds for the construction and staffing of a classroom for every twenty students and which allowed them to return to a portion of their former homeland in Arizona and New Mexico. Riordan rebuilt the school and traveled to the Hampton Institute in Virginia and to the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in

Pennsylvania where he recruited the first native American teachers for the Ft. Defiance School. Riordan continued to serve as Agent to the Navajo until 1884. His letters provide a contrast between his willingness to take on the task at hand to “Do whatever the task demands” and the failure of his efforts. Riordan writes, “No one remembers a winter like this” after his dam is washed away in a spring flood.

The following letters were written between December 1882 and December 1883. The first six letters were addressed to H. Price the Commissioner of Indian Affairs.

December 21, 1882
Ft. Wingate N.M.

My Dear Sir:

Pursuant to your telegraphic instructions I arrived here on the morning of the 14th inst and waited for the instructions by mail which reached here Saturday evening last. I started on the following morning with an orderly kindly furnished by General Bradley for the agency...At the risk of being considered premature I would beg to submit to the Honorable Commissioner some of my observations while at the Agency. In the first place I found the agent's quarters filthy in the extreme. The

dirt lay thick all over the floor and a general air of squalor and filth pervaded the whole place. We could not get an ounce of grain for our horses. The horses of the Agency were actually suffering for want of food. Dirt, manure and offal shocked the eye at every step. The same characteristics prevailed throughout. The room I slept on and which is called the office is a dirty bleak room. I could get no light to write by. The snow blew in my head and face through the broken window. The next morning I wrote a letter with cold hands and face in that same room. When I asked for some wood I was told there was none...Yesterday morning I heard a Navajo scholar ask for a pair of shoes. He was barefooted and there was snow on the ground. He was told by Mr. Eastman that the man who had the key of the issue room was at the railroad and that he (the Indian) would have to wait until the key returned. There must be something wrong about a system like that. And it must be very hard to convince a bare-footed Indian on the outside of an issue room door with the key 25 miles away that you are really his friend when you tell him to wait.

Hon H. Price
Commissioner of Indian Affairs
Navajo Indian Agency
Ft Defiance Az. January 3, 1883

Dear Sir,

A close examination of the property here confirms all that I have previously said about its condition. Filth and slovenliness characterize everything I have yet seen...As for the school, I believe I said to you already it was very nearly a disgrace. I now say it is a disgrace, without any qualifications or mental reservations whatever. That it is unfinished is not the fault of its present managers, but its filthy condition is. One of the floors is nearly chopped through from some one chopping wood on it. I do not know who is to blame. I simply state the facts. I will know where the blame is before many moons however and shall not hesitate to state it. Mr. Taylor who has been missionary to the Moqui Agency, arrived here on Sunday and I understand he is to take charge of the school. We left the following morning for Manuelito and I did not get a chance to talk with him but if he does take charge of this school I shall insist on a general clean up as a starter. If the Indians get their ideas of cleanliness and order from the present condition of this school my judgment is they will retrograde. I never saw a

Navajo "hogan" as filthy as the Industrial School. I do not pretend to judge of the earnestness of the people who are now managing it. They are to all appearances good, zealous, well-meaning people, but the results as far as I can judge are deplorable and are not what were intended by the Government in founding the school. I do not doubt that it can all be remedied.

Navajo Agency

Ft Defiance Ariz March 28th 1883

Dear Sir:

I would recommend to the Dept I st. That the school building be finished as originally intended so that all its unoccupied rooms can be used. 2nd That a good wall (adobe) say 6 ft high, be built around the school enclosure and a gate be placed on the front side, and that then all those who have no business in the school building or yard be kept out of it. As it now is the place is a rendezvous for Navajos of all ages and both sexes with all that that implies. 3rd That the agent be instructed and empowered to bring the water of Bonita Creek down to the Agency by ditch or flume as may be determined and the water used to raise vegetables in and around the school-house plot, plant trees around it (cottonwoods) and generally relieve the present

dreary aspect of the place. The outlay would be small, the results great, and its beneficial influence on the indians in the way of training, incalculable. The distance to bring the water would be, say one half to three fourths of a mile. 4th That the agent be authorized to put eight or ten indians at work at once to give the whole place a general clean-up. Tear down all the unsightly adobe walls that are partly in ruins, dig ditches where necessary and get things in shape. And if the Dept will allow it, go ahead with work #3 as above. I am

Very Respectfully Yours
DM Riordan Agent

Hon. W. Price

Comsr Indian Affairs

Washington D.C.

Estimate of cost of bringing water down for use of Navajo Industrial Boarding School, and for school garden.

Building up dam, grading for flume and for distributing tank	\$730.00
Making and laying half mile of flume and constructing tank	\$900.00
Materials for flume and tank	
3000 ft 2" pipe (distributing)	
@ 22c	660.00
	\$2,670.00

July 30th 1883

Hon. Commissioner of Indian Affairs
Washington, D.C.

Sir:

I would respectfully request that the authority granted this day (F. Auth 6103/6125) be modified so far as to permit of my visiting the Houghton Farm near Mountainville N.Y. for the purpose of making the necessary arrangements for an Indian boy (graduate of Carlisle) now there to proceed to the Navajo Agency when the school opens. It is my desire to make the educated indians teachers of their own people and I am anxious to take a young couple, who are educated and very competent, to begin this work with."

Very Respectfully

D.M. Riordan, Agent

Navajo Agency

Ft Defiance Ariz. Aug 24, 1883

Hon Commissioner of Indian Affairs Washington
D.C.

Sir:—

I have written so much and so often about our wretched condition of the buildings at this Agency

that my head fairly aches at the thought of having to say any more. And yet it must be done. There is not a single article of goods or supplies in our issue rooms that is not in danger of becoming totally ruined from the mud and water pouring down from the leaky roofs. Flour, sugar, coffee; all the food supplies literally going to the dogs. Every day's work on those buildings in June only served to reveal their hopeless condition. They are absolutely beyond repair. It is like pouring water down a rat hole to spend money on them. What am I to do? Must I pay for the goods that are destroyed by the elements in spite of all I can do?

Sooner than see this flour etc rot I am going to issue such of it as may be wet to deserving Indians.

The following letter (Blanche Riordan MS collection) describes his trip to recruit the teachers in a letter to his brother. He writes first of his visit to the Hampton Institute in Virginia:

Navajo Agency
Ft. Defiance Ariz Aug 31, 1883

My dear brother,

We first drove to the National Soldiers Home and examined the beautiful grounds and surroundings; thence to the Institute where I met general S.C. Armstrong, the Principal. We spent the

day there thoroughly examining the workshops, classrooms, etc. Being Sunday I could not see the different industries in practical operation, but I saw enough to prove to me that some Indians can be taught. I saw there just as good shoes, as good harnesses, as good buildings, as good crops as can be made, built or grown by the ordinary white person; and all the work of the pupils of that school....Reaching Carlisle, we drove to the school which occupies the ground and buildings formerly uses as a cavalry rendezvous for the U.S. Army, about a mile from the depot...What I saw here was, to a great extent a repetition of what I saw at Hampton. The same evidences of the practicability of training Indians to industrial pursuits; and of their ability to acquire while young, the elements, at least of an ordinary English education. Even if some of them do relapse when sent back to their tribes, if they do take up with their old lives and habits, the effect is not wholly lost. The Indian is capable of improvement.

Riordan continued in this letter to his brother to discuss his trip by train to Houghton Farm in Mountainville, Orange County New York where he met with Robert Stewart to offer him the teaching position at the Ft. Defiance Boarding School.

Navajo Agency
Ft. Defiance Ariz Aug 31, 1883

Sir:—

In reply to your communication of the 23d instant (C 15.504) I beg to say that, as things now look, it is possible I may yet remain here. If I do I shall go ahead on the original plan and have the Carlisle pupils take hold in this school.

I am about to start for the northern part of the reservation and shall make an effort while on the trip to get at the number and quality of school pupils available in the section visited. By the time I return the Department will have acted and the future work can be outlined intelligently. I shall forward today estimate of cost of completion of school building, which is the very first thing to do. Whether this school is to be run by the Government or by contract it is a shame and a disgrace to ask any one to begin work in it until it has been made habitable.

I will be back here in two weeks and will then be better able to express an intelligent view.

Very Respectfully

DM Riordan

Agent

The school at this Agency having closed and not at all likely to be reopened during the present fiscal year I have the honor to request authority to issue as may be deemed advisable the staple supplies remaining on hand to visiting sick and indigent Indians. Many of these supplies such as Sugar, Coffee, Salt and Etc are being badly injured by the vermin which infest the miserable storerooms at this Agency and it would be real economy to issue such of the supplies as cannot be well and safely kept over. This authority was granted at the close of the last school year and I respectfully request the same authority now

Very respectfully

Your Obedt Servt

DM Riordan

U.S. Ind Agt.

The manual labor boarding school was introduced at the Choctaw Academy in Kentucky in 1834 where academic instruction went “hand in hand with the acquirement of a practical use of the tools for the artisan and the implements of the farmer.” (Adams, 1946, p. 36) By 1848, 16 manual labor schools were in operation, and seven were under construction.

Captain Richard Henry Pratt founded the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania in 1879 (Eastman, 1935; Pratt, 1964). A year earlier he had taken 17 Indian prisoners in his charge to the all-African American Hampton Institute in Virginia. There, under the direction of General Samuel Chapman Armstrong, the students divided the day between academic instruction and vocational instruction. Students were educated in coeducational programs to produce a “civilized” family unit. They also participated in the “outing system” living with a farm family after graduation where they practiced vocational skills. Pratt “...reasoned, if the Indian became associated with the Negro, in the mind of the general public, the Indian would be given an additional burden to overcome.” (Ryan, 1962, p. 30).

At the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, Pratt ordered teachers to speak only in English. Students who spoke in native languages were forced to confess their offenses in front of the student body. Students were ordered to cut their hair, dress in military-style uniforms and to select a new name from the chalkboard.

In 1869 President Ulysses S. Grant appointed a board of Indian Commissioners to supervise the appointment of Indian

agents, teachers and farmers (Reyhner & Eder, 1989). The board divided Indian agencies among 13 different religious groups. The Navajo Tribe was assigned to the Presbyterian Board of Missions. Charity Ann Gaston, the first teacher for the Navajos under the treaty of 1868 arrived in Ft. Defiance in the fall of 1869. She received a yearly salary of \$600 from the Department of the Interior. In 1871 Charity Ann reported an annual enrollment of 40 students (Bender, 1989, p. 51). In 1873 Charity Ann was told that her position could be better filled by a male teacher. The school was closed until a male teacher could be found.

Riordan's letterbook provides a perspective on the arrival of the first Navajo teacher and her husband and on the institution of formal schooling in Ft. Defiance. Antoinette Williams was born in 1868. Orphaned on the return journey from Ft Sumner, she was adopted by an agency employee from Ohio: Perry Williams. and his Navajo wife. In her early teens Antoinette traveled by train to New Jersey to attend the Blaristown Academy. At fifteen, dressed as an Anglo schoolgirl, she was photographed with Captain Richard Henry Pratt and eleven young Navajo boys on the bandstand at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania.

At Carlisle Antoinette lived in the girls' dormitory: a three-story white brick building with a broad porch which faced the bandstand. On Sundays the townspeople came to watch the Indians play in the band. In the summer Antoinette was sent to a farm in the town of Shippensburg in Cumberland County where she learned to cook and clean for the farmer John E. Boher.

At the age of eighteen, Antoinette was married to Robert Stewart a Creek who came to Carlisle from Dr. Robertson's Tallahassee Mission in Oklahoma when the school burned. D.M. Riordan writes of visiting Carlisle, arranging the marriage and arranging to have the young couple depart on their wedding day: November 1, 1863, for Ft Defiance. Pratt describes the event in an article titled "Wedding Bells" (Pratt, 1883)

This is only the second time they have rung in our history as a school. Robert Stewart and Antoinette Williams were married by Dr. Norcross assisted by Dr. Brown, at half past 11 o'clock on the 1st inst., and left the same afternoon for New Mexico where they will be employed in the school at the Navajo Agency. The ceremony, which was an impressive one, took place in the chapel in the presence of the whole school.

The Stewarts left Carlisle with a suitcase full of wedding presents and the good wishes of their friends and teachers to become the first native American teachers on the Navajo Reservation, Their

employment was terminated less than a year later. Captain Richard Henry Pratt defended them, "In justice to the youth sent to this Agency (Navajo) it should be stated that the surrounding circumstances, more than any other fault on their part, brought their services to an end." (Pratt 1883, Woerner, 1941 p. 36)

Ft Defiance Ariz Aug 1 Ith, 1883

My Dear Sir:

When I left your presence on the 20th of July I carried with me the feeling that I had met and talked with a man who was thoroughly in earnest in his work. I felt too that as long as I did what was right I would be sustained. While awaiting the return of the Commissioner I visited Hampton and Carlisle and examined the methods pursued at those places. I came away filled with the belief that the solution of this Indian problem lies in education; practical education and common horse sense. Before leaving the East I made arrangements to double up a smart young Creek boy with our Navajo girl Nettie Williams, bring them out here and make teachers of them. They are competent, intelligent, industrious. They would make a splendid team for this work. So far, good.

Sir:—

I have the honor to submit for your consideration the following list of employees which I deem necessary for the proper conduct of the school during the present fiscal year, viz:

1 Superintendent, male,	at \$1,500 per annum
1 Industrial Teacher,	\$1,200
1 Matron female	\$900
1 Teacher male	\$600
1 Teacher female	\$360

I cannot furnish descriptive lists at present as none of those designated are at the Agency. I will however say this: the matron I have in view is a thoroughly competent lady who has had experience as matron at the Nevada State Orphan Asylum and is known to have a good record.

The two last named are graduates of Carlisle Training School competent in every way and well fitted by nature and education for the difficult work before them. I desire to say to you, sir, that I have a personal interest in the success of these last. They are worthy young people. I promised them the future nearest their hearts; and have opened to them their future field of effort as educators of their own people. A letter from Captain Pratt informs me that they will be at Carlisle on the 15th and after their union will be ready to come here on the shortest notice. My leaving here ought not to affect this

plan; and I shall try to have them here by the 1st Sept, trusting as I do that you will not let this fail. The promises made them in good faith should be fulfilled. You will attend to this, will you not? They will give a good account of themselves never fear. The wages named will give them a show to save a few dollars.

As soon as I get hold of the right men for the first two positions I will say so and ask your approval unless previously received.

Very respectfully

DM Riordan

Agt Navajo Agency

Ft Defiance Ariz. Sept 27 1883

In the Fall Riordan wrote to Captain Richard Henry Pratt at Carlisle to ask about Antoinette and Robert and to express his grief over the death of Maunelito's sons. Riordan writes:

My Dear Captain—

Your valued favor of the 20th reached me today just as I reached home from Albuquerque. Have been on the jump for some weeks. Shall want Antoinette and Robert just as soon as i can hear from the Indian Office that my list of school employees is approved. Am very very anxious to get this school started: Miserably as the

Government has done and will do by the school I regret every idle day; and these enforced delays fret and chafe me emotionally.

Am afraid we will have an up-hill pull of it for a while. The deaths of Jack and Manuelito Chow created a feeling which was hard to combat;...

Navajo Agency

Ft Defiance Ariz. Dec 31 st, 1883

Hon Commissioner of Indian Affairs

Washington D.C.

Sir:—

I have the honor to enclose herewith a communication from the Supt of the Navajo Industrial Boarding School to which I respectfully ask your attention. My belief is, the best interests of the school and of the service would be subserved by granting the request contained therein; that is the issuing of rations to the five subordinate working employees of the school. They cannot support themselves if they have to pay board here. This is a high priced country. I might except from this the male teacher who gets \$50 per month, though as he is an Indian I think it would be better, on the whole, to include him; but surely the other four ought to be allowed the ordinary school ration. They can then eat in the school with the children, having precisely

the same fool. There need be no fear of the supplies running short if the authority asked for is granted, as the quantity on hand is ample for all needs during the present fiscal year.

Very Respectfully
DM Riordan Hon. W. Price
Comrs Indian Affairs
Washington D.C.

Navajo Agency
Ft. Defiance Ariz Sept 1, 1883

Hon Commissioner of Indian Affairs
Washington, D.C.

Sir:—

Enclosed I beg to hand you estimates for the completion of the school building and for the repairs of Agency buildings prepared with all possible care. Every item is cut down to the lowest possible notch and not one cent of this estimated cost can be dispensed with without injury to the service.

Your favorable consideration of these is earnestly requested.

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Very Respectfully

DM Riordan

U.S.

Indian Agent

Navajo Agency

Ft. Defiance Ariz Dec 31st , 1883

Hon Commissioner of Indian Affairs

Washington, D.C.

Sir:-

Today terminates a year's service for me in this place, and naturally I look back over what has been done during the year. It has been the hardest year's work I ever did - and I have earned my own living since I was eleven years old. Could I have known in advance of the incessant toil and vexation, the care and anxiety, the disappointments and hardships to be undergone, no persuasion would have induced me to accept the position. My head is very strikingly grayer than it was a year ago. There is not a moment from rising until retiring that is not fully taken up by the demands upon me. There is no such thing as a leisure moment day or night for any one who tries to do all that is required of an Agent for the Navajo tribe; nor no privacy. The Indians come at all hours and sometimes from long distances, and

although not all who come are really deserving, and not every case presented is urgent, still they must be listened to in order to determine the merits of the demands or requests made. Far into the night, frequently, I am obliged to sit up and listen to some complaint or some plea. The frequent interruptions constantly impede my efforts to keep up the office work. One cannot do this work well or quickly under the conditions as they exist. 17000 Indians can keep any one man alive, constantly busy if he does his duty...I begin to see some streaks of light ahead- and if I do say it myself - things are in much better shape than they were a year ago today. If I stay here I hope to make as much improvement in the next calendar year as I did in this. By that time this Agency ought to be a credit to the U.S. It has not been in the past.

But no one can do what he ought with an insufficient force, nor if he is obliged to feel that the written promise of the institution he works for is not worth the paper it covers.

Very Respectfully
Your obedient servant
DM Riordan
Agent

When I read in Dennis M. Riordan's 1884 letterbook (Van Valkenburgh MS, AHS) "There is no one here who remembers a

thaw coming in February before,” I realized the connection between history and memory, between the word written on parchment paper and the winter rains which fall outside my office today, a connection which can come only in my own recollection and recording of these stories. To document these stories I often read inventories of manuscript collections and sat beside boxes of documents and photographs. There were few Navajo voices in these collections. Photographs often provided a connection which did not appear in the written materials. Two photographs of Antoinette Williams Stewart, the first Navajo teacher, appeared in *The Handbook of the North American Indian* (Emerson, 1984). Her name was not included in the caption. Just as the written record privileged non-Indian voices, the photographic record often did not identify Navajos. Marjorie Thomas responded to a photograph, “That looks like my grandfather. Do you have names for this picture?” Below the photograph the names of the non-Indian subjects had been recorded, the other were listed as “Navajo Indians”. Maybelle Little talked about the “King of Spain” haircut she received in the 1930s. In the dormitory students found their images with the same broad bangs on a playing card: the king of

spades. She reflects, “Those things come back to hurt you if you don’t understand them.”

Ann Nolan Clark, a BIA teacher in New Mexico in the 1930s wrote, “We need not carry the guilt of yesterday’s mistakes, only the responsibility to rectify them.” I hope that by presenting an account of a single year in the history of Navajo education new understandings and new ways of rectifying yesterday’s mistakes will be found.

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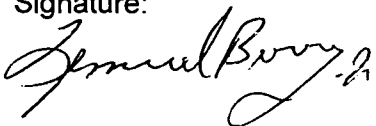
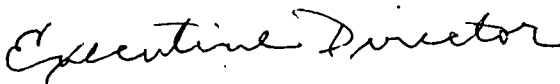
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