

## US Development and Struggles in the West, Industrialization, Immigration, and Urbanization – Dawes Act Newsletter

The arrival of Europeans in America heralded a sea change in life of Native people. In the nineteenth century tribes in the Pacific Northwest fell victim to the crushing force of America's expansion West. The sovereignty, community, hunting and fishing grounds, and customs of the Native people were continually threatened. The conflict between American settler's beliefs in "ownership" of the land and Indian's sovereign right to the lands they occupied continually threatened the survival of tribes, including those in the Pacific Northwest.

*Congressman Henry Dawes, author of the [Dawes] act, once expressed his faith in the civilizing power of private property with the claim that to be civilized was to "wear civilized clothes...cultivate the ground, live in houses, ride in Studebaker wagons, send children to school, drink whiskey [and] own property."*  
(U. S. Statutes at Large, Vol. XXIV, p. 388 ff.)

In the mid nineteenth century, one of the most prominent forces in stripping Native people of their sovereign rights was the General Allotment Act, commonly known as the Dawes act. The original intentions of the Dawes act, to make sure Indians had ownership of property and render the reservation unnecessary (**Note – Shana – This is not a proper interpretation but I am struggling with how to word it**), were considered humane. However, the resulting losses to Indian tribes were once again devastating.

The Dawes act divided reservation lands into parcels with each family owning shares on which to farm, thus "civilizing" the Indian tribes. Families receiving land allotments were not allowed to sell their plots until they received title to that land. With land ownership came American citizenship.

The Dawes act continued the destruction of Indian tribes. Much of the land on reservations was unsuitable for agriculture and families often sold their parcel as soon as allowed. Land on the reservation not deeded to tribal members was frequently sold to white settlers, often through coercion, or taken by fraud. Thus, the Dawes act continued the disintegration of Tribal lands and resources. In Washington State, by the time the Dawes Act was repealed in 1934, over 30 percent of the Colville and Spokane reservation lands were owned by non-Indians (Greene, Carlson, Myers 2005).

Another product of the Dawes Act was the establishment of Indian boarding schools. Whites saw little of value in the culture and traditions of the Tribes they encountered and most believed it was in the best interest of Indians to assimilate. The difficulty of assimilating Indians was often known as the "Indian problem."

The first of these schools were founded by Richard Pratt, a US Army Officer who offered up the idea that one must "Kill the Indian in him, and save the man" (*Official Report of the Nineteenth Annual Conference of Charities and Correction* (1892), 46–59). Pratt believed that Indians were without culture only because they had not been exposed to "civilized" customs. Like African slaves, with isolation from their native language and culture, and exposure to European customs, Indians educated in boarding schools would assimilate into American society.

The United States government may have operated as many as 100 Indian boarding schools. In the Pacific Northwest, Indian children were often sent to boarding school in Oklahoma. Indian children were often taken from their families by force and brought to Indian schools. Here, long hair was cut short, Indian names were replaced with Anglo names, and the speaking of their own language was punished. The expectation was that the schools would train Indian children to be productive and civilized members of American society. Those who returned to their tribes had often forgotten their language and culture.

In 1924 the United States government passed the Indian Citizenship Act. This act granted citizenship to Indians as a continuation of the assimilation of Indians into American society. By this time Indians had fought in World War 1 alongside white soldiers, unlike Black soldiers who were segregated in to their own units.

Today, Indian people continue to struggle with the legacy of the Dawes act. Students and teachers can obtain more information about the Dawes act and its effect on Indian tribes through the lesson plan's provided here: (insert link)