Committed

Burch, Susan

Published by The University of North Carolina Press

Burch, Susan.
Committed: Remembering Native Kinship in and beyond Institutions.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/82220

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2816137
Chapter 6: Remembering

I think about my grandmother a lot. She was afraid that nobody would care about her. . . . She probably thought during her life that nobody would care when she was gone because she already wasn’t valued at Canton. . . . Her family cared and tried to get her out, but since they couldn’t, she worried that she never mattered, that she wouldn’t matter. . . . I want her to know that I won’t ever forget her. It’s more than that: I’ll always remember her. I know she remembers me, too.

—Faith O’Neil, reflecting on her grandmother, Elizabeth Alexis Faribault

Stepping from her car, Faith O’Neil breathed deeply, questions trailing after her. Flanked by her friends Lucy Smego and Manfred Hill, she climbed the steps leading up and into the Craftsman bungalow that had housed Superintendent Hummer and his family during his tenure at Canton Asylum. Elizabeth Faribault’s granddaughter paused in the living room, remembering her ancestor tending to an elderly Levi Hummer. O’Neil thought of her grandmother cleaning these floors and laundering the family’s belongings up until her own child—Cora Winona (Faith’s mother)—was born. Tracing her grandmother’s footsteps, Faith O’Neil searched for signs of Elizabeth Faribault and answers to her own questions.

As she approached the stairs to the basement, O’Neil was overcome. Fear, grief, and longing wailed forth. She wept. “Grandma if you’re with me please talk to me,” Faribault’s granddaughter pleaded, “I’ve come a long way to look for you again.” A question followed her gaze down the stairway: what had happened to Elizabeth here? She already knew part of the answer—“Something awful.” Past and present blurred as she sought to reconstruct moments from her grandmother’s time within this house. Moments when the superintendent would have been alone with her. Moments that Elizabeth Faribault’s descendant feared and needed to remember.

The years of Harry Hummer’s proximity to Elizabeth Faribault, his knowledge of her, and his claims on her and on her behalf outraged her descendant. “There isn’t a word in English yet that is awful enough to describe him and what he did,” O’Neil asserted. “I think you used my grandmother like a slave and kept her from her own family and her own people,” she
yelled out loud, hoping her message would carry to the late superintendent. She persisted, anger mounting. “Her name was Elizabeth Alexis Faribault. And I believe you got my grandmother.” O’Neil’s voice strained while naming trauma her ancestor endured, “She wanted so much to get back to her family.” Supported by the BIA, Dr. Hummer always blocked the way. Faith O’Neil has continued to hold Hummer responsible for Elizabeth Faribault’s death. She holds him responsible for the trajectory of her family’s story, for her mother Cora’s birth. The visit to Canton, like other rememberings, has brought hurt and continued questions.

Back in her home in California, Faith O’Neil picked up a black-and-white photograph from the 1920s. The mother and daughter stand in the foreground on what appears to be a late spring day. A portion of a water tower rises up in the background, brick buildings flanking it. Elizabeth Faribault stands erect, her right arm at her side. Her bobbed haircut shadows part of her face. Her expression appears both intense and obscured: is she angry, exhausted, resigned? Young Cora Winona holds firmly to her mother’s left hand. A bonnet covers most of her hair, save for a small lock sweeping down the center of her forehead. A buttoned coat covers most of her white shirt and white stockings. The toddler looks back directly at the camera, unsmiling.

Faith O’Neil returned the gaze. Murmuring that Cora—her parent—“had her mother’s arms; they both have such long arms,” the Faribault descendant nodded approvingly. The “cynical look” on the elder Faribault’s face pulled O’Neil back to the moment on film. Thinking about the hostile environment of the locked wards, she noted that her grandmother “took care of my mother when she was a baby. She was very attentive to my mother.” Looking at her grandmother and mother, Faith O’Neil wondered who had stood behind the camera. She wanted to know too: How did her two institutionalized family members experience all of their moments together before and since the shutter had clicked?

O’Neil placed the photo back on the table. Her decision to shield the photograph from public view reflects an intentional act of honoring. Recognizing how few choices Elizabeth Faribault could make independently while incarcerated at Canton, her granddaughter has insisted that the image remain private. Each morning and evening, O’Neil looks upon the picture and remembers all her ancestors. She thanks Nellie Kampuska for helping sustain her grandmother during their shared detention. “Lizzie Red Owl,” O’Neil acknowledged, “brought my mother up for . . . the remaining time she was at Canton.” Some of the kin relations remain cloudy. Fathers. Grandfathers. The people
inhabiting her family story, as Faith O’Neil has experienced them, create a complicated web of relationships—imposed, contested, contradictory, missing, treasured, yearned for, and imagined. For her and many others for whom institutionalization is a cross-generational lived history, there is no full account or a full accounting.11 “It makes me wonder how many relatives I have living around me that I don’t even know about,” O’Neil has said matter-of-factly.12

An array of Faribault family keepsakes surround the vintage photograph, including a copy of Elizabeth’s 1922 letter to relative David Mazakute. Faith O’Neil has memorized one of the lines—“is ci koda twena waamiciyataninsni”—and its English translation.13 “You said that nobody ever thought about you or cared about you,” O’Neil said to the letter, to her grandmother.14 She has read Faribault’s handwriting, the letter’s contents, and the stories between the lines as a kind of remembering into the future. Elizabeth’s granddaughter answered back, her own voice, presence, and searches countering the erasure Canton Asylum inflicted on them both. “We won’t forget you,” O’Neil assured her ancestor, “we’re trying to make things better for you.”15 She has often wondered what loved ones called her grandmother during her lifetime. In the silence wrought by institutionalization, O’Neil has offered a new Dakota name: Mićarťé (“my heart”).16 Smiling at Elizabeth, at the belonging between them, O’Neil affirmed, “I am so happy to be your granddaughter.”17

Faith O’Neil has continued to seek Faribault family history—her history. As she described it, the search for kin and memories of them has been both “intense” and “incomplete.” “I went looking for David,” his sister explained, “and I found out about Grandma. Elizabeth.”18 Remembering for this family has pulled to many places: the Sisseton Reservation, Canton, Fort Defiance, a scattering of marked and unmarked gravesites. Searching for her grandmother’s remains, trying to find out what happened to her at Canton and how she died, has continued to infuse O’Neil’s life. “She’s always with me in spirit,” O’Neil said, her eyes flashing as she nodded. “I’ll never quit searching.”19

Many descendants have shared the reality of living with unanswered and unanswerable questions, and, even so, they have continued seeking. Faribault’s kin looked for connections to their ancestors beyond the walled perimeters of Canton Asylum and state and national archives. For others, including the family of O-Zoush-Quah, many of the stories were close to home.

Jack Jensen (Prairie Band Potawatomi) stood at a distance, taking in the landscape of calico fabric and embroidered names of his kin on the quilt.
Surrounding sky blue medallions, small pink and peach daisies unfurl alongside other plants in burnt yellow, bright red, and soft green. Names and patterned petals spread across the squares like a family garden. Some call the quilt pattern Dresden Plate, but a slightly older name seems more apt: Grandmother’s Sunburst. Caught like a cotton skyscape in midmovement, the four-foot-by-six-foot span of swirling colors and names appears animated, like planets rotating, orbiting one another, continuing beyond the fabric edges of their universe.

The family quilt’s story extends far beyond the current edges too. Like many Native American women who came of age in the late nineteenth century, Jensen’s great-grandmother O-Zoush-Quah had honed her beading and sewing skills under the watchful gaze of her female elders, their craftsmanship and stories intermingling with her own. In subsequent decades, O-Zoush-Quah’s own daughters likely swayed in baby hammocks made from their relatives’ piecework. As the girls grew up, they would watch their mother transform scraps of fabric into new shapes, absorbing lessons about family and quilting.

Shortly after the BIA forcibly removed O-Zoush-Quah to Canton in 1908, her daughters drew on these memories to sustain themselves and to support their mother. On behalf of the family, Shack-To-Quah (Nettie Hale Tork) wrote to the Canton staff, registering their desire for O-Zoush-Quah’s return. Explaining that “of late years she’s not worked on beads, but did piece quilts,” her children asked that she be given supplies to do patchwork as a means of passing the infinite time and loneliness of her detention. In letters referenced but not preserved, O-Zoush-Quah’s daughters may have explicitly conveyed, too, that they wanted her quilt pieces sent to them. It is likely that the Potawatomi elder intuitively knew this to be true. Daughter Pah-Kish-Ko-Quah kept her mother’s hand-sewn sunbursts all of the years of her exile.

At her home on the Potawatomi Reservation, Pah-Kish-Ko-Quah created additional quilt squares. Filling hours marked by fabric strips, worn scissors, thread, and imagination, Mary Hale Jensen—as she was known to many of her neighbors—rounded out additional medallions and petals, penciling names of family members on the backs of flour sacks before stitching them on the top layer. In all likelihood, she began with her mother’s English name—Maggie Hale—adding herself and her siblings around the central plate. Fingers running across cloth and thread, the mother and daughter left traces for others to find and follow generations later.
For O-Zoush-Quah’s descendents, the quilt is a storyteller, an archive, medicine. As Jack Jensen explained, imagining is an act of healing. In her hands, the institutionalized Potawatomi woman grew a quilt that could cloak or hold her children, her grandchildren, her great-grandchildren, and beyond. Jensen imagined his grandmother Mary visiting with the quilt pieces, layering them in a cardboard box in the 1920s, imagined her son Francis quietly looking at the family portrait of O-Zoush-Quah that hung on the living room wall. He wondered: Did Mary resist sewing the squares together as she waited, hoping that her mother would still return to assist in this final assembling? After both women had died (O-Zoush-Quah in 1943, Pah-Kish-Ko-Quah in 1968), the box remained untouched for nearly five decades. Jensen could picture the quilt squares passing down from attics to younger hands until the fall of 2017, when he inherited them.

Looking at the contents of the box spread across the dining room table and considering the possibility of assembling different patterns brought him back to haunting questions. Like his father, Francis, Jack Jensen had long wondered about O-Zoush-Quah, “what she had done to be taken away.”

An awareness of the violence common within asylums troubled him as well. What had she endured? From his ancestor’s vantage point, institutionalization had meant something completely different than the archival reports Jensen had read. He realized that his elders never forgot the Potawatomi healer and never accepted that the U.S. government knew better than they what was best and right. O-Zoush-Quah’s present absence shifted, her challenges to asylum staff and locked wards becoming legible everyday acts of defiance, refusal. Nodding at the revelation, Jensen stated plainly, “the problem was never the person—O-Zoush-Quah—or being Potawatomi.” In the name of Western medicine and care, he recognized, the BIA had taken O-Zoush-Quah away from her family and tribe.

Like his great-grandmother before him, Jack Jensen was drawn to work as a healer. For most of his adult life, he pursued a career in orthopedic surgery away from Potawatomi lands, people, and traditions. Returning to Indigenous practices as an older adult created new spaces to address cross-generational wounds. Jensen’s father, Francis, had shared with his eldest son O-Zoush-Quah’s healing eagle feathers. The plumes—dark tips and dappled vanes—fanned outward; soft leather strands wrapping the quills draped downward, swaying gently in Jensen’s hand. In a vision quest, his connection with his great-grandmother strengthened. She welcomed him, claimed him, and remembered him. Since then, Jensen has continued to meet O-Zoush-Quah in dreams, in stories, in family photographs, and in her
healing feathers that he stewards now. Through remembering, Jensen has remained engaged in a healing process that includes his ancestors past and others yet to come.\textsuperscript{35}

The choice to compose a full quilt from the inherited pieces extended this family’s story. A half-sunburst anchoring the top portion of the quilt now explicitly names the ancestor around whom the patchwork has grown: orange needlepointing spells out “O-Zoush-Quah.” Rising from the bottom hem, a half-sunburst answers, completing the circle pattern. In pink embroidery, “Pah-Kish-Ko-Quah” / “Mary Hale Jensen” is honored.\textsuperscript{36} The threaded tributes and their placement in the design tie O-Zoush-Quah closely to her family, countering what years of institutionalization had wrought. Incorporated into one of the medallions, Jensen also had added “Bodewadmi” as well as its English translation, “Keepers of the Fire.” Explicitly connecting ancestors with the name Potawatomi call themselves, the assembled quilt expands, telling new stories within older ones.\textsuperscript{37}
On a fall weekend in 2019, Jack Jensen invited others to join him in celebrating the quilt and its story. He displayed what he has called the “ancestry project” at his ranch outside of Houston, an invitation to seek connections with sacred spaces, dreams, ancestors, and history. As with many ceremonies honoring Indigenous relations, stories join people across families, communities, generations, and nations.

Thirty years earlier and hundreds of miles away, Lakota activist-journalist Harold Iron Shield, hand outstretched, welcomed other ceremony attendees. Familiar faces nodded their recognition or smiled invitations to newcomers. The group then turned, walking slowly toward the unmarked graves. An inscription on a modest bronze plaque nearby registered 120 names of American Indians buried in the Canton Asylum cemetery. Iron Shield and the others began to pray. Many people shared stories. Elders recalled spiritual men and women they had known who were exiled to the Asylum’s locked wards, individuals who never returned. Some offered memories passed down to them about young people being taken away to the Indian Asylum. Others remembered teachers at boarding schools wielding the specter of Canton in the face of resistant children. Seeking to restore “a spiritual connection to our relatives who died,” the journalist from Standing Rock and the others who had joined him affirmed, “These ancestors know they are not forgotten, that their memories are cherished and held up, that what happened to them will no longer be hidden from view.”

Surrounding the cemetery, manicured hills and putting greens reflected the afterlife of the Indian Asylum: in 1948, the town converted the property into the Hiawatha Golf Course. Over the two decades that Iron Shield coordinated ceremonies—from 1987 until 2007—on the former campus of the Asylum, Native kin from across the United States, along with their supporters, gathered to remember the people buried between the fourth and fifth holes.

For many kin, this kind of remembering is a returning—to stories, to people, and to places that hold both. Some descendants have described their first visit to the Asylum grounds as “a return.” They followed the traces of their ancestors’ lives and presence at Canton, threads that tie them also to this site. It is a fraught reunion.

As many family members have experienced it, the Indian Asylum was “more of a prison atmosphere for Indian people who resisted living on the
reservation,” a place “erected to imprison spiritual leaders and students of government boarding schools who did not conform to government policies of the early 1900’s.” In Canton Asylum, one relative asserted, the BIA had “a place to send their troublemakers, and cemented their omnipotent power over our Nations.” It followed a familiar pattern: “This is a classic example of what the government did to Indians,” Harold Iron Shield remarked. Kin mourned that “many of those who are incarcerated suffered from beatings, sexual abuse and inhumane conditions.” Standing on the site where her Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation ancestors had been forcibly detained, Pemina Yellow Bird imagined them crossing the threshold into the Main Building. “They must have been frightened, deeply traumatized, at finding themselves locked up in such a cold, hateful and foreign place, so far from home and family.” Looking across the graves and noting that “a lot of people from different tribes are buried here,” Ivan Looking Horse (Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe) added, “A lot of them died horrible deaths.” Story by story, the legacy of institutionalization at Canton extended beyond tribal and temporal boundaries, cascading into the present day. As Iron Shield explained at the tenth annual ceremony he facilitated, “Many of the family members still are living in pain and grief over this unjust situation.”

Standing on the former asylum grounds, Harold Iron Shield (second from left) addresses a group in 1998 about Native people’s lived experiences there. Through educational events such as this, honoring ceremonies, and his many newspaper articles, the activist-journalist sought to reaffirm “a spiritual connection to our relatives who died” at the Canton Asylum. For Iron Shield and others, reclaiming the cemetery has remained an active expression of Native self-determination. Photograph by Lloyd Cunningham. Courtesy of the Argus Leader. Relatives of Harold Iron Shield granted permission for use of this image.
When repatriation and psychiatric survivor activist Pemina Yellow Bird accepted Iron Shield’s invitation to attend an honoring ceremony in 2000, she carried with her ties to broader social movements and overlapping communities targeted by settler interventions.\(^52\) Cemeteries like Canton’s, Yellow Bird claimed, laid bare the damaging impact of wide-ranging U.S. institutions, including those that specifically targeted American Indians (such as boarding schools and orphanages) as well as psychiatric hospitals in whose walled campuses Native and non-Native people had long struggled and often perished.\(^53\) The human rights advocate from Fort Berthold recognized the Indian Asylum’s unmarked gravesites surrounded by a golf course as the material and symbolic process of elimination and replacement. Yellow Bird’s collaborator Pat Deegan, a national leader in state hospital cemetery restoration and reclamation work, similarly viewed the harms perpetuated by institutionalization at Canton as distinctive but also familiar. She joined her colleague at the ceremony in support of the “collective recovery as devalued people.”\(^54\) For Pemina Yellow Bird, a commitment to Native self-determination guides the path forward. “We must then tell our stories of loss, of violation, of what happened to us, and we must at long last grieve those things; we must determine how the past informs us, is part of who we are, and how it walks with us every day of our lives as Native people.” She added pointedly, “We must determine for ourselves, based on our own original teachings and instructions, what we must do to care for ourselves.”\(^55\)

As a living process, rituals commemorating the people institutionalized at Canton continue to take different forms. Organized walks, drumming and prayers, and visits by Native nations delegations have marked important kinship connections over the years.\(^56\) In the wake of Harold Iron Shield’s death in 2008, others have planned gatherings in small and large scale. For several years, Lavanah Judah, whose relatives were confined at both Canton Asylum and St. Elizabeths Hospital, coordinated ceremonies at the South Dakota cemetery.\(^57\) Reaching across differences and trying to build strong and enduring cross-tribal ties has been at times, according to the Yankton advocate, “painful, hard work.”\(^58\) As Judah and others acknowledge, the honoring events have not included everyone with shared Indigenous connections to the Indian Asylum.\(^59\) As is often the case with social movement efforts, organizing remains a work in progress. Still, observances honoring the hundreds of people involuntarily committed to Canton and the thousands more impacted by institutionalization have provided focal points to fortify community relations that had been frayed or broken. For American Indian historians Kay
Davis and Anne Gregory, who met at one of the Canton gatherings, practices of remembering have generated new kinship ties as well as new ways to understand their Indigenous pasts and possible futures.

Anne Gregory attended the 2013 honoring ceremony in Canton longing to know more about her ancestor, feeling heartbroken by some of what she had already found, and keenly aware that the story was incomplete. She lingered at the gravesite of Emma Gregory, hoping to close the distance that violence, time, and geography had placed between them. Joining others afterward, Anne Gregory was drawn to Kay Davis’s map, its vectors of colored threads spreading out from each reservation that had members forcibly institutionalized at the federal asylum. Anne traced a line from Creek Nation to Canton, marking Emma’s experience. “My great-great-grandmother, Emma Gregory, is buried in the cemetery,” the Oregon relative explained, gesturing toward the area beyond the split-rail fence behind them. Davis smiled knowingly, a quiet invitation. Anne continued, “She has one of the more terrible experiences in Canton.” She added, shaking her head, “Emma Gregory was listed in one of the reports for being left in a room with no windows, strapped to a bed for very long periods of time, getting no normal sun or fresh air. She received not just poor care but also neglect.” Anne reflected on the revelation of Emma’s institutionalization and the rippling ramifications it has had on her own life. They were “echoes that travel through a family over generations when something violent happens.”

Kay Davis nodded in recognition and began sharing details gathered during her own genealogical research of Emma Gregory. Discrepancies between their understandings of the Creek woman’s past surfaced, and the two moved closer, as if to bridge the historical fissures. Returning to another center on the map, the historian from Nett Lake threaded archival work back to her own family story. Learning as a teenager that her father was an enrolled member of the Bois Forte Chippewa, Davis was drawn to better understand genealogy—her own and her tribe’s. She earned a degree in Native American studies and applied that training to tribal-acknowledgment work. The process had honed her skills in the archives; it also underscored the distance between sources generated and preserved by the U.S. government and the lived histories of American Indians. Kay Davis’s insights resonated with Anne Gregory, who felt that the conversation united both their individual stories and their broader Indigenous histories. On the grounds where their ancestors had been detained and had perished, a spark passed from elder to younger: Anne Gregory headed back to Oregon to pursue an undergraduate
degree in history and Native American studies. “I wanted to do what Kay had done,” she later reflected. “I wanted to pursue genealogy and research to empower Native families.”

As Anne Gregory and Kay Davis experienced it on that spring day in 2013, remembering is a practice that creates new connections across geographies and generations. In this genealogy of learning, reciprocity, and self-determination, Gregory now claims kinship not only to her Creek ancestor detained at Canton Asylum but also to Harold Iron Shield, Pemina Yellow Bird, Kay Davis, and countless other Indigenous witnesses, survivors, and storytellers. “It’s like a circling,” she explained in conversation, her voice trailing off. Native ancestors past, present, and emerging fill the quiet.

Their active presence attests that the ongoing settler project of erasure and replacement, while profoundly destructive, has not fully succeeded. Davis, Gregory, and numerous other Indigenous people directly affected by Canton Asylum and institutionalization know that theirs is a story of violence, trauma, and tragedy. It is also necessarily a story of survival, resistance, and transformation, a living process that Anishinaabe scholar-author Gerald Vizenor calls “survivance.” He writes, “Survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent. . . . Survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, detractions, obtrusions, the unbearable sentiments of tragedy, and the legacy of victimry.”

Many relatives of people incarcerated at the Indian Asylum have described their continued existence as the counterstory to institutionalization’s sustained violence. Writing to other Bois Forte Chippewa Tribe members, Davis once detailed her day-to-day practice of survivance through her role as their historian: “So life is busy, doing the work of love, history of our people, and meeting with many of you.” Kinship sustained this lifework. “I appreciate your help, your encouragement, and most of all, your desire to maintain the records of our Tribe,” she declared.

Gregory’s dreamscape ahead has led to the classroom. The entangled history of institutionalization and settler colonialism is an axis along which her teaching of Indigenous North American history travels. “What I usually do. . . . is bring to class a postcard that used to get handed out,” she explained. The iconic early twentieth-century image has “white scratch-writing on the bottom” identifying the Canton Asylum for Insane Indians. “I introduce it as a physical place, I ground it in the history of the place,” Gregory continued, “and then introduce the people and the dynamics.” She tells the students about her great-great-grandmother Emma, the world she inhabited in the locked wards, and her unsurprising and horrifying death from tuberculosis.
Connecting history to the present day, Gregory shares the challenges in piecing together her family’s story—“the practical implications of genocide.” For her, remembering Emma Gregory immediately brings to mind survival. “I think about this a lot,” she noted, her voice picking up tempo. “As a teacher and mentor . . . I end up taking it forward.” She paused before adding, “Some days I think it’s the only thing you can do.”