



Kansas Historical Society to study the Shawnee Indian Mission using Ground Penetrating Radar this fall

Background: In 2016, the City of Fairway entered a public/private partnership with the Kansas Historical Society (KHS) and the Shawnee Indian Mission Foundation (SIMF) to assume the day-to-day operations of the site. The Shawnee Indian Mission has been owned by KHS since 1927. In 2014, the KHS reduced the site's hours of operation due to significant cuts in its budget. By the start of 2016, the site was only open a few days a week during the spring and summer. KHS anticipated that by the end of 2016, the site could be closed to the public. City leadership started discussions with the KHS and SIMF about creating a partnership where the City would operate the site with financial assistance from the SIMF. KHS would maintain ownership and be responsible for large maintenance and preservation expenses.

About the site: The Shawnee Indian Mission is widely considered the most historically significant site in the state of Kansas. In 1927, the state used eminent domain to acquire twelve acres of former Mission land which contained the three original brick buildings. This is the only time Kansas acquired a historic site in such a way. The Santa Fe, California and Oregon trails all passed by the Shawnee Indian Mission. The oldest, still standing residence in Kansas is now known as the West Building and is the 2nd oldest brick and mortar structure in the state. In addition to serving as its namesake, the Mission was where the vote occurred for Kansas to become a state. The site served as the executive office for the first territorial governor and the place where the Bogus Legislature voted to make Kansas a slave state which, in part, led to what is referred to as the period of "Bleeding Kansas". It also served as a civil war encampment for union soldiers with a battle occurring near the grounds in 1864. The Shawnee Indian Mission was designated as a National Historic Landmark in 1968.

Originally located near Turner in present day Kansas City, Kansas, the Shawnee Indian Mission relocated to present day Fairway, Kansas in 1839 on more than 2000 acres of land that stretched from County Line Road south to 63rd street and Nall Avenue east to State Line Road. The Mission was originally led by Rev. Thomas Johnson (the namesake of Johnson County, KS). At its peak, nearly two-hundred Native American children were enrolled at the Mission which was established as a manual training school. The Shawnee Indian Mission operated at the site from 1839-1862. In 1855, the boarding school transitioned to a day school. An important distinction about the Shawnee Indian Mission is that it was not a federally mandated Indian boarding school. Federally mandated schools did not begin until 1879, seventeen years after the Shawnee Indian Mission ceased operations.

While called the Shawnee Indian Mission, only one-third of the known students were members of the Shawnee Tribe with the remaining students coming from up to 22 other tribes. Male students were taught blacksmithing, milling, shoe cobbling and farming. The third floor of the East building contained their sleeping dormitory. Female students were taught to cook, spin wool and sew. They lived in the North Building. Along with learning trades, all students were taught academics from teachers who resided on site and Native American students attended classes with the white children of the teachers, farmers and site staff. School sessions generally occurred fall-spring with students returning home to be with their families during the summer.

Why conduct a GPR investigation now: In recent years, a significant amount of attention has

been given to the history of native boarding schools in North America and beyond. In June of 2021, Secretary of Interior Deb Haaland announced the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative to investigate the loss of human life and lasting consequences of the Federal Indian Boarding School System. Because the Shawnee Indian Mission pre-dates the Federal schools (although it did receive Federal funds), it is uncertain as to whether and/or to what extent the Shawnee Indian Mission will be included in the initiative.

Since 2016, all three partners have acknowledged there is likely much we can still learn about the experiences of those who attended and worked at the Mission. While the Kansas Historical Society has no documentation that suggests unmarked graves may be located on the remaining 12-acres, all agree that pursuit of fact-based knowledge can benefit everyone. Given the proximity of several tribal cemeteries within short distances from the Mission, historians of the site believe it is unlikely that students who died at the school would have been buried on the Mission's grounds, especially on the remaining 12-acres. The Shawnee Tribe, for example, had a cemetery located just four miles from the Mission in present day Shawnee, Kansas. Delaware and Wyandotte Tribes also had cemeteries in the area.

Based on historical information available today, four Native American students were reported to have died while attending the school. In addition, Rev. Johnson had several of his own children die during the same period. By conducting the Ground Penetrating Radar study, the Kansas Historical Society, along with the City of Fairway and the Shawnee Indian Mission Foundation, hope to further our knowledge and understanding of the Shawnee Indian Mission State Historic Site.

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