

# SHOE MEMORIAL



Located in Ninoododadiwin (room 228) in the Legislative Building, the Shoe Memorial honours the children who never made it home from residential schools.

# SHOE MEMORIAL

In May and June 2021, investigations using ground-penetrating radar located more than a thousand unmarked graves near the sites of four former Indian residential schools in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. These findings shocked the public and brought renewed attention to the brutal treatment experienced by generations of Indigenous children in Canada's Indian residential school system.

As news of the discoveries spread, Canadians from across the country demonstrated an outpouring of support, with some learning for the first time about the history of residential schools. For many it was confirmation of what they already knew. Memorials began to grow across the nation, including in front of Ontario's Legislative Building at Queen's Park. People placed shoes, toys and notes to

show their support and compassion for both the children and the survivors. These memorials became a symbol of residential schools and the children who never made it home to their families.

For many days and weeks, the memorial at Ontario's Legislature grew as more items were added. They remained untouched as the summer turned to fall and then to winter. To preserve the memorial as the weather worsened, the Legislative Assembly (in consultation with Indigenous leaders) decided to move the shoes and objects inside where they could be properly cared for and stored. Following the preservation process, The Shoe Memorial, a permanent display and tribute to the children, was completed in November 2022 as part of the Gathering Place exhibit of Ontario Indigenous art housed at the Legislature.



## ABOUT THE

# SHOE MEMORIAL

This memorial represents the journey the children who never made it home are taking to the spirit world. The objects in the memorial are oriented towards the west, the direction that the sun sets and the way we all leave the physical world. The path also represents the journey we all must take together in truth and reconciliation. In addition to honouring the children, families and communities impacted by Indian residential schools, the memorial reminds us that we should never forget to speak and teach the truth as we walk the path of healing together. Only with meaningful reflection and action can we begin to move forward.

The shoe memorial was conceived in collaboration with an Indigenous person who is personally impacted by the Indian residential school system.



# INDIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### INTRODUCTION

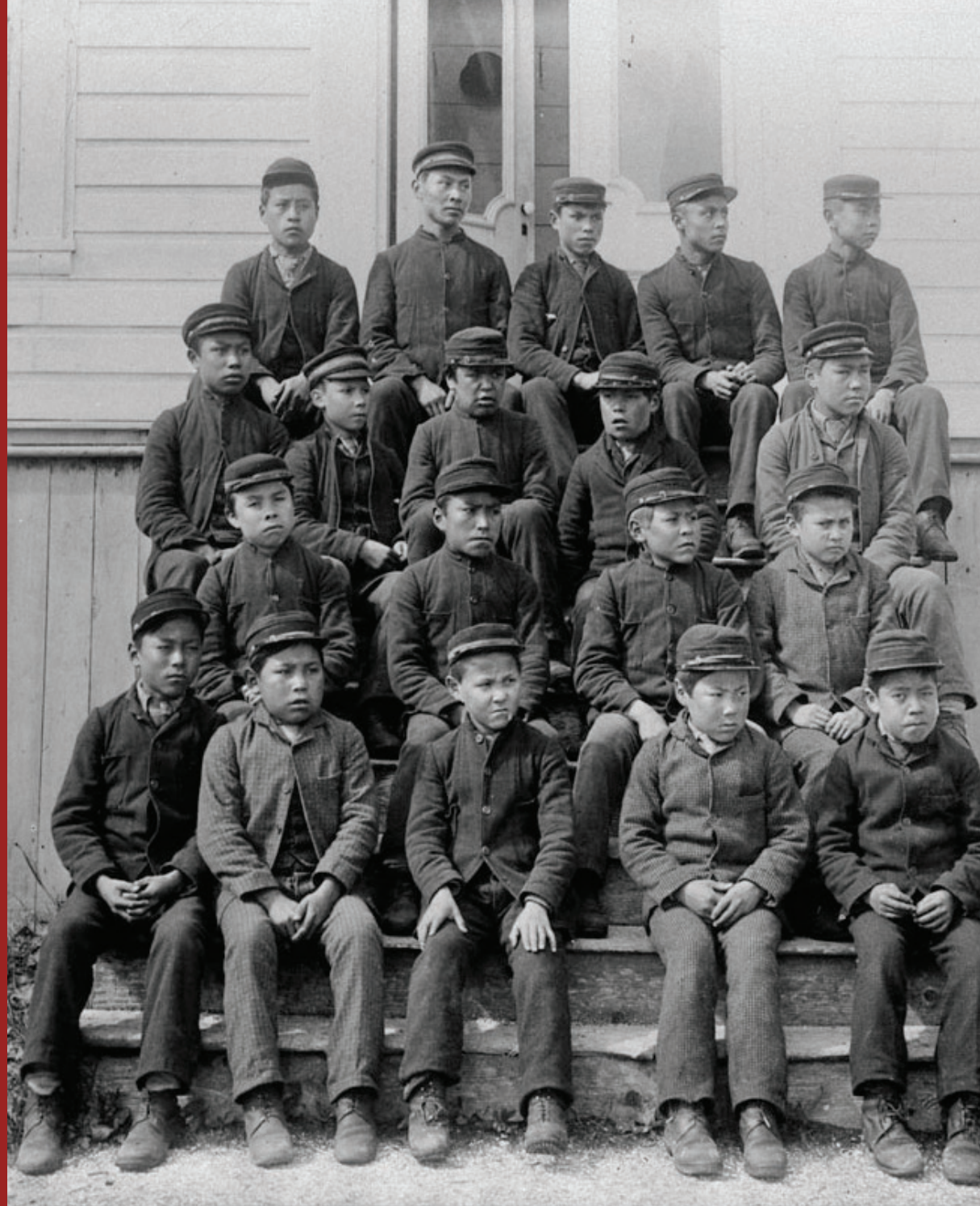
For over a century, Indian residential schools were a system of custodial institutions established for Indigenous (First Nations, Métis and Inuit) children. They were funded and operated by the Government of Canada in partnership with the churches, with the last schools closing in the 1990s.

There were 139 federally supported schools in Canada, as well as other residential schools that did not receive federal support. Approximately 150,000 Indigenous children attended the schools.

### RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS IN ONTARIO

Ontario had 18 Indian residential schools funded by the federal or colonial governments over a span of 163 years. The Mohawk Institute Residential School in Brantford was the earliest to open, in 1828, and was attended by 15,000 students during its operation before its closing in 1970. The Stirland Lake High School (Wahbon Bay Academy) was the last to close, in 1991.

More than 400 children are known to have died while attending these schools, with an unknown number still missing and unaccounted for. Twelve locations of unmarked burial sites have been identified in the province, with the Ontario government saying there are likely more.



*Indian School Boys*

Photo: Metlakatla Indian Residential School  
Library and Archives Canada



## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Residential schooling was a key component of the federal government's policy of assimilating and Christianizing Indigenous peoples. By removing children from their families and home communities, punishing them for speaking Indigenous languages, and preventing them from engaging in their traditional spiritual, cultural, and social practices, residential schools tried to extinguish the children's Indigenous identities. Historian John Milloy notes that the long history of the residential school system "is marked by the persistent neglect and abuse of children." Residential school survivors have described brutal and sadistic treatment at the hands of school staff including harsh punishments, malnourishment, and lack of healthcare, along with rampant physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. This abuse, compounding the pain of being torn away from their families, communities, and cultures, tormented many residential school survivors and resulted in intergenerational trauma for their families and communities.

## CANADIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS SETTLEMENT AGREEMENT

The 2006 Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement—the largest class action settlement in Canadian history—addressed the legacy of the Indian residential schools through compensation for survivors, measures to support healing for survivors, commemorative activities, and the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

## TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION (TRC)

The Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established in 2008 to document and preserve the history of residential schools and the experiences of survivors. The TRC's six-volume final report was published in 2015 and made nearly 100 recommendations (Calls to Action) to help achieve reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and other Canadians.

## MISSING CHILDREN AND UNMARKED GRAVES

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission reported that children in residential schools "died at a far higher rate than school-aged children in the general population." Malnourished children lacking adequate healthcare and living in crowded, unsanitary conditions easily fell victim to tuberculosis and other diseases that swept through the schools unchecked.

"Many students who went to residential schools never returned," the TRC noted. Families were often not informed when their children were severely ill, or had run away, or died.

