

Catholic boarding school documents staying in Montana

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The Ursuline Academy, which opened in 1912 in Great Falls, Montana. (Photo by Robstutz used via Creative Commons license)

In a significant turn of events, an array of Catholic Ursuline Boarding School documents related to the boarding school students of several Indigenous nations in Montana and Alaska will remain in Montana. Several U-Hauls loaded with everyday records, photos, ledgers, scrapbooks, and other archives were originally slated to transfer to the Catholic Jesuits in Boston, Massachusetts.

It's considered win for area tribes whose children attended the former Ursuline Academy starting in 1912, because keeping the archives at home in Great Falls

History Museum allows easier access to area descendants researching their family histories.

“The ever-increasing need for research and documentation of our Tribal encounters and associations with others is becoming more urgent each passing year,” Steve Lozar, Confederated Salish, Kootenai and Pend d’Oreille, said in a statement to the museum. “Having a centralized repository with access to family historical records would be of the greatest value to all who desire to learn about their extended families, religious affiliations, births, deaths and life circumstances.”

Lozar is a member of the Montana Historical Society’s Board of Trustees and Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribal Council.

The Roman Union Ursuline Sisters of the Western Province, keepers of the records, reportedly expressed relief at discovering a local professional entity willing to take on the extensive original documents with the agreement to organize and safely preserve them carefully for current and future Native generations.

“They were quite gracious,” said Kristi Scott, the history museum’s director. “I think they were a bit relieved, honestly. I think they wanted to do the right thing with the records. They seemed to readily agree that truth-telling is very important. And because they didn’t live during the time of the missions, the best they could do to tell the truth is make the records available.”

The Catholic sisters ran innumerable government-or-church-built [boarding schools](#). [Religious organizations comprised 210 of 417 government-run schools in the United States](#), according to [the July 2024 federal boarding school report](#). The Ursulines [acknowledged their role in the systemic racism and breaking down of family culture, traditions, and language](#) both in a statement to Scott and in [a 2023 report](#).

“The Roman Union Ursuline Sisters of the Western Province have long lamented the suffering caused by Native American boarding schools and the generational trauma that continues to this day with many others,” said Dianne Baumunk, province provincial of the Western Province. “We continue to take a hard look at the issues of racism in our country and our part in the harm that colonialism played in our own history.”

Baumunk continued: “We’re working to make the extensive archives of our schools in Montana and Alaska available through the Cascade County Historical Society,

where the archives will reside and be accessible to all. Our hope is to take steps in truth telling. That will bring some healing.”

Two Ursuline sisters from California, plus two sisters from Montana, originally visited Great Falls in 2023 to discuss the future of the archives with an unidentified tribal member looking for a relative’s boarding school history. But when that contact did not show, Scott intervened and requested a timely appointment with the women.

“I spent close to four hours with the nuns having coffee, discussing the records,” said Scott.

After the Ursulines moved both the Eastern and Central Ursuline Province’s archives to Boston College, Ursuline Western Province archives were on track to join them. But the June 22, 2023 chance meeting proved fateful for entire swaths of tribal descendants in the west region seeking information.

“The significance of this collection to our neighboring tribal nations cannot be overstated,” Scott said. “For over 100 years this collection has been cared for and maintained by the Ursuline Western Province, yet was quite challenging to access. We are honored to provide a neutral ground for discovery of these archives.”

Scott said her staff will care for, preserve, inventory, catalog, and digitize the records in a climate-controlled environment as a long-term agreement with the Ursulines.

The goal is to make the archives available first to the tribes by January 2025, and then to the general public sometime in 2026. The museum is undergoing a major \$1 million renovation to its research center, which will open September 14.

“Also, because I am a historian and I am a researcher, and I know how important it is to have access to original records,” Scott said. “But then just beyond that, I’m a human, and I know that this is a dark period in American history, and instead of sweeping it under the rug, how about if we just open it up and let people make their own decisions of what was good, what was bad, or—not even that—just having the truth in front of you to read and then interpret in your own lens?” —ICT