

Renaming the Indians: State-Sponsored Legibility through Permanent Family Surnames among the Sisseton and Wahpeton at Lake Traverse, 1903 [Abstract]

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Legibility is a state-sponsored goal of making citizens known, visible, measurable, and controllable (Scott 1998). Projects undergirding this goal include censuses, cadastral surveys, and the creation of permanent surnames, all of which, unsurprisingly, were important parts of the push to assimilate Native peoples in the United States. While land allotment is well understood as a keystone of assimilation policy, less well known is a project to “rename the Indians,” the goal of which was to provide inheritable family surnames. Guidelines called for using Native names wherever possible, an end to the adoption of English names, and rejecting “ridiculous” or “offensive” names. Renaming rolls were created by Dr. Charles Eastman for a number of Dakota and Lakota tribes in the early 1900s.

An analysis of the Sisseton and Wahpeton renaming rolls shows that most tribal members had adopted permanent surnames prior to Eastman’s work. Many used English translations of their Native surnames, and English first names had become almost universal. Somewhat surprisingly, we found virtually no “famous” names such as those notoriously given at boarding schools. Women in most cases lost their Native names due to the Anglo-American practice of the wife adopting her husband’s surname.

While allotment and renaming indeed had the effect of making Native Americans more “legible” to the government in a manner that “made sense” to them, these policies had the perverse effect of making Native names and people less legible, constituting a calculated displacement of Natives in addition to an imposed and futile land-tenure system.

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