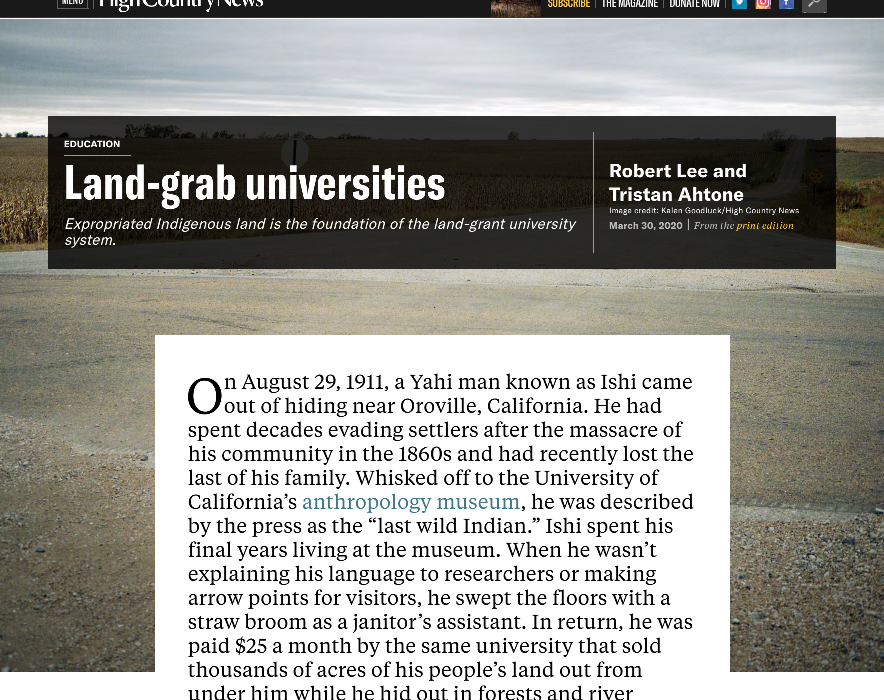


EDUCATION

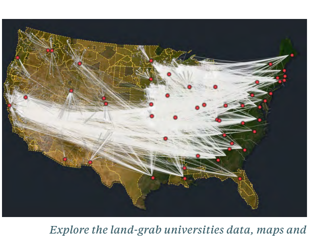
Land-grab universities

Expropriated Indigenous land is the foundation of the land-grant university system.

Robert Lee and Tristan Ahtone
Image credit: Kalen Goodluck/High Country News
March 30, 2020 | *From the print edition*

On August 29, 1911, a Yahi man known as Ishi came out of hiding near Oroville, California. He had spent decades evading settlers after the massacre of his community in the 1860s and had recently lost the last of his family. Whisked off to the University of California's anthropology museum, he was described by the press as the "last wild Indian." Ishi spent his final years living at the museum. When he wasn't explaining his language to researchers or making arrow points for visitors, he swept the floors with a straw broom as a janitor's assistant. In return, he was paid $25 a month by the same university that sold thousands of acres of his people's land out from under him while he hid out in forests and river canyons.

Ishi may be known in Indian Country and to California public school students, but his story remains mostly obscure — though considerably less so than that of the millions of acres of Indigenous land sold to endow the land-grant universities of the United States.



Explore the land-grab universities data, maps and interactive features

In 1862, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Morrill Act, which distributed public domain lands to raise funds for fledgling colleges across the nation. Now thriving, the institutions seldom ask who paid for their good fortune. Their students sit in halls named after the act's sponsor, Vermont Rep. Justin Morrill, and stroll past panoramic murals that embody creation stories that start with gifts of free land.

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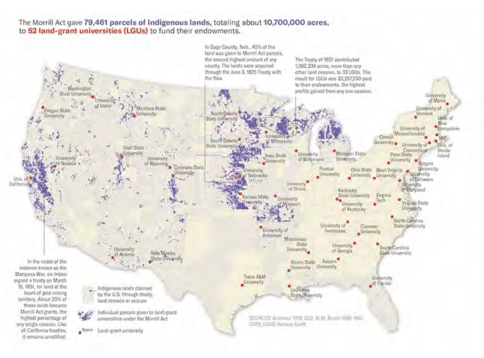
Behind that myth lies a massive wealth transfer masquerading as a donation. The Morrill Act worked by turning land expropriated from tribal nations into seed money for higher education. In all, the act redistributed nearly 11 million acres — an area larger than Massachusetts and Connecticut combined. But with a footprint broken up into almost 80,000 parcels of land, scattered mostly across 24 Western states, its place in the violent history of North America's colonization has remained comfortably inaccessible.

We reconstructed approximately 10.7 million acres taken from nearly 250 tribes, bands and communities through over 160 violence-backed land cessions, a legal term for the giving up of territory.

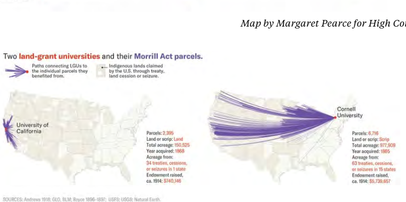
Over the past two years, *High Country News* has located more than 99% of all Morrill Act acres, identified their original Indigenous inhabitants and caretakers, and researched the principal raised from their sale in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. We reconstructed approximately 10.7 million acres taken from nearly 250 tribes, bands and communities through over 160 violence-backed land cessions, a legal term for the giving up of territory.

Our data shows how the Morrill Act turned Indigenous land into college endowments. It reveals two open secrets: First, according to the Morrill Act, all money made from land sales must be used in perpetuity, meaning those funds still remain on university ledgers to this day. And secondly, at least 12 states are still in possession of unsold Morrill acres as well as associated mineral rights, which continue to produce revenue for their designated institutions.

The returns were stunning: To extinguish Indigenous title to land siphoned through the Morrill Act, the United States paid less than $400,000. But in truth, it often paid nothing at all. Not a single dollar was paid for more than a quarter of the parcels that supplied the grants — land confiscated through outright seizure or by treaties that were never ratified by the federal government. From the University of Florida to Washington State University, from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to the University of Arizona, the grants of land raised endowment principal for 52 institutions across the United States.



Map by Margaret Pearce for High Country News



Map by Margaret Pearce for High Country News

By the early 20th century, the grants had raised $17.7 million for university endowments, with unsold lands valued at an additional $5.1 million. If those sums sound paltry today, bear in mind that places like the University of Nebraska-Lincoln matriculated just 20 students to its first class in 1869. Contemporaries not only welcomed the grants as "a very munificent endowment," they competed to acquire them to found new colleges or stabilize existing institutions. The money provided interest income, inspired gifts and boosted local economies, which is why a 2014 study called it "the gift that keeps on giving."

Altogether, the grants, when adjusted for inflation, were worth about half a billion dollars.

Chances are you have heard land acknowledgements recited at many of these universities, formal statements that recognize the Indigenous peoples who formerly possessed the lands those colleges now stand on. What many of these statements miss is that land-grant universities were built not just on Indigenous land, but with Indigenous land. It's a common misconception, for instance, that the Morrill Act grants were used only for campuses. In fact, the grants were as big or bigger than major cities, and were often located hundreds or even thousands of miles away from their beneficiaries.

Kalen Goodluck/High Country News

Niles Canyon Railway, Sunol, California.
PARCEL ID: CA210040S0010W0SN020AE½SWAL
INDIGENOUS CARETAKERS: Chap-pah-sim; Co-to-plan-e-nee; I-o-no-hum-ne; Sage-womnee; Su-ca-ah; We-chil-la
OWNERSHIP TRANSFER METHOD: Seized by unratified treaty, May 28, 1851
GRANTED TO: State of Alabama
FOR THE BENEFIT OF: Auburn University
AMOUNT PAID FOR INDIGENOUS TITLE: $0
AMOUNT RAISED FOR UNIVERSITY: $72.01

Today, these acres form the landscape of the United States. On Morrill Act lands there now stand churches, schools, bars, baseball diamonds, parking lots, hiking trails, billboards, restaurants, vineyards, cabarets, hayfields, gas stations, airports and residential neighborhoods. In California, land seized from the Chumash, Yokuts and Kitanemuk tribes by unratified treaty in 1851 became the property of the University of California and is now home to the Directors Guild of America.In Missoula, Montana, a Walmart Supercenter sits on land originally ceded by the Pend d'Oreille, Salish and Kootenai to fund Texas A&M. In Washington, Duwamish land transferred by treaty benefited Clemson University and is now home to the Fort Lawton Post military cemetery. Meanwhile, the Duwamish remain unrecognized by the federal government, despite signing a treaty with the United States.

Recent investigations into universities' ties to slavery provide blueprints for institutions to reconsider their histories. Land acknowledgements furnish mechanisms to recognize connections to Indigenous dispossession. Our data challenges universities to re-evaluate the foundations of their success by identifying nearly every acre obtained and sold, every land seizure or treaty made with the land's Indigenous caretakers, and every dollar endowed with profits from dispossession.

"Unquestionably, the history of land-grant universities intersects with that of Native Americans and the taking of their lands," said the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities in a written statement. "While we cannot change the past, land-grant universities have and will continue to be focused on building a better future for everyone."

Kalen Goodluck/High Country News

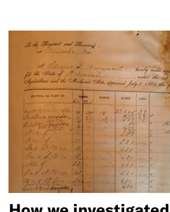
Fort Lawton Post Cemetery, Seattle, Washington.
PARCEL ID: WA330250N0030E0SN150AN½NESC
INDIGENOUS CARETAKERS: Duwamish; Suquamish
OWNERSHIP TRANSFER METHOD: Ceded by treaty, Jan. 22, 1855
GRANTED TO: State of South Carolina
FOR THE BENEFIT OF: Clemson University and South Carolina State University
AMOUNT PAID FOR INDIGENOUS TITLE: $3.91
AMOUNT RAISED FOR UNIVERSITY: $58.06

A SIMPLE IDEA

Few years have mattered more in the history of U.S. real estate than 1862. In May, Abraham Lincoln signed the Homestead Act, which offered farmland to settlers willing to occupy it for five years. Six weeks later came the Pacific Railway Act, which subsidized the Transcontinental Railroad with checkerboard-shaped grants. The very next day, on July 2, 1862, Lincoln signed "An Act donating Public Lands to the several States and Territories which may provide Colleges for the Benefit of Agriculture and the Mechanic Arts." Contemporaries called it the Agricultural College Act. Historians prefer the Morrill Act, after the law's sponsor.

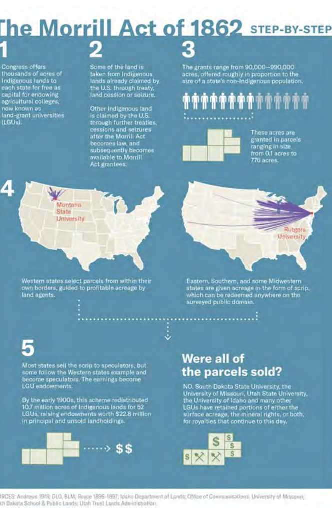
The legislation marked the federal government's first major foray into funding for higher education. The key building blocks were already there; a few agricultural and mechanical colleges existed, as did several universities with federal land grants. But the Morrill Act combined the two on a national scale. The idea was simple: Aid economic development by broadening access to higher education for the nation's farmhands and industrial classes.

"In the North, we are at the heyday of industrialization and the maturing of American capitalism, and the land grant, like other kind of acts — the Homestead Act or the creation of the Department of Agriculture — any of these type of activities that happen during this time, are really part of an effort in creating this modern apparatus for the state," said Nathan Sorber, author of the book *Land-Grant Colleges and Popular Revolt*. "Land-grant institutions can be understood as part of an effort to modernize the economy."



How we investigated the land-grant university system
Read more

The original mission was to teach the latest in agricultural science and mechanical arts, "so it had this kind of applied utilitarian vibe to it," said Sorber. But the act's wording was flexible enough to allow classical studies and basic science, too. With the nation in the midst of the Civil War, it also called for instruction in military tactics.



Map by Margaret Pearce for High Country News

The act promised states between 90,000 and 990,000 acres, based on the size of their congressional delegation. In order to claim a share, they had to agree to conserve and invest the principal. Eastern states that had no land in the public domain, as well as Southern and some Midwestern states, received vouchers — known at the time as scrip — for the selection of Western land. Western states chose parcels inside their borders, as did territories when they achieved statehood. The funds raised were either entrusted to universities or held by states.

Like so many other U.S. land laws, the text of the Morrill Act left out something important: the fact that these grants depended on dispossession. That went without saying: Dubiously acquired Indigenous land was the engine driving the growing nation's land economy.

"You can point to every treaty where there's some kind of fraud, where there's some kind of coercion going on, or they're taking advantage of some extreme poverty or something like that so they can purchase the land at rock bottom prices," said Jameson Sweet (Lakota/Dakota), assistant professor in the Department of American Studies at Rutgers University. "That kind of coercion and fraud was always present in every treaty."

"That kind of coercion and fraud was always present in every treaty."

Hundreds of treaties, agreements and seizures bulked up the U.S. public domain. After surveyors carved it up into tidy tracts of real estate, settlers, speculators, corporations and states could step in as buyers or grantees, grabbing pieces according to various federal laws.

The first to sign on for a share of the Morrill Act's bounty was Iowa in 1862, assigning the land to what later became Iowa State University. Another 33 states followed during that decade, and 13 more did so by 1910. Five states split the endowment, mostly in the South, where several historically Black colleges became partial beneficiaries. Demonstrating its commitment to the separate but equal doctrine, Kentucky allocated 87% of its endowment to white students at the University of Kentucky and 13% to Black students at Kentucky State University.

Not every state received land linked to the Morrill Act of 1862. Oklahoma received an agricultural college grant through other laws, located primarily on Osage and Quapaw land cessions. Alaska got some agricultural college land via pre-statehood laws, while Hawai'i received a cash endowment for a land-grant college.

HCN tracked down and mapped all of the grants tied to the Morrill Act and overlaid them on Indigenous land-cession areas in a geographic information system. The results reveal the violence of dispossession on land-grant university ledgers.

Kalen Goodluck/High Country News

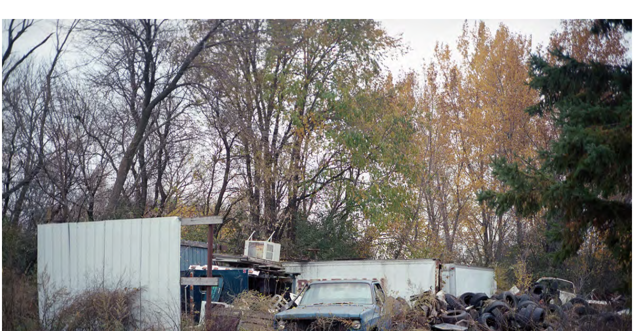
Directors Guild of America, West Hollywood, Los Angeles, California.
PARCEL ID: CA270010S0140W0SN080ASECA
INDIGENOUS CARETAKERS: Buena Vista; Car-I-se; Cas-take; Hol-mi-uk; Ho-lo-cla-me; Se-na-hu-ow; So-ho-nut; Te-jon; To-ci-a; Uva
OWNERSHIP TRANSFER METHOD: Seized by unratified treaty, June 10, 1851
GRANTED TO: State of California
FOR THE BENEFIT OF: University of California
AMOUNT PAID FOR INDIGENOUS TITLE: $0
AMOUNT RAISED FOR UNIVERSITY: $786.74

Kalen Goodluck/High Country News

Cornfields, Adams, Nebraska.
PARCEL ID: NE060050N0080E0SN290ANEOH
INDIGENOUS CARETAKERS: Kansas (Kaw Nation)
OWNERSHIP TRANSFER METHOD: Ceded by treaty, June 3, 1825
GRANTED TO: State of Ohio
FOR THE BENEFIT OF: Ohio State University
AMOUNT PAID FOR INDIGENOUS TITLE: $0.93
AMOUNT RAISED FOR UNIVERSITY: $88.79

Kalen Goodluck/High Country News

Private residence in Merced, California.
PARCEL ID: CA210070S0130E0SN250ANEMA
INDIGENOUS CARETAKERS: Ko-ya-te; New-chow-we; Pal-wis-ha; Po-ken-well; Wack-sa-che; Wo-la-si; Ya-wil-chine
OWNERSHIP TRANSFER METHOD: Seized by unratified treaty, May 30, 1851
GRANTED TO: State of Massachusetts
FOR THE BENEFIT OF: University of Massachusetts and MIT
AMOUNT PAID FOR INDIGENOUS TITLE: $0
AMOUNT RAISED FOR UNIVERSITY: $103.09



Kahn Goudeau, High Country News

Scrap yard of Ed Ives, Ely, Nevada, Shoshone.
PHOTO By: © KAHN GOUDEAU/HIGH COUNTRY NEWS
CAPTION Ed Ives, a Shoshone Indian and Western Shoshone Nation Vice-Shoshonetown and Wildwater **PRESIDENT TRUCKER BUTTON** Colorado Sands, 2006. Ed and Dag, 2, 2005.
ASSIGNED Kahn Goudeau
FOR THE BENEFIT University of Minnesota
CREDIT Kahn Goudeau/High Country News
CAMERA Nikon D2X, Nikon 24-85mm

MINNESOTA'S WINDFALL

Consider the Dakota cession of 1851. Four Dakota bands signed treaties at Mendota and Traverse des Sioux, Minnesota, in the summer of 1851, relinquishing their claims to lands west of the Mississippi River. The lands became the future Reservation for the Dakota.[1] They did so in response to the withdrawing of rations, the threat of violence, enforced starvation, the killing of game and the destruction of agriculture. Call it coercion.

In the following years, Congress unilaterally altered the agreements and reduced the reservation considerably. Much of the reservation was occupied by white settlers; a Dakota Nation fought back in 1862. In response, Gov. Alexander Ramsey called for the extermination or exile of the Dakotas and deployed U.S. Army and militia units to wage what is so called "Dakota War." Congress would go on to abrogate Dakota treaties and expel the bands from the state of Minnesota. The Dakota would become the most numerous nation in U.S. history. In December 1862, the U.S. Army hanged 38 men to death for their participation in the insurrection.

Less than five weeks later, Gov. Ramsey claimed Minnesota's Morrill Act windfall.

The Dunstan, Wigfaxton, Mikwauketon and Wahpekute Dakota cession of 1851 financed the endowments of more land-grant universities than any other treaty or stratagem.

The 52 land-grant universities benefiting from the 1851 Treaty of Traverse des Sioux and Treaty of Mendota:

- Alabama A&M University
- Alabama State University
- Cornell University
- Fort Valley State University
- Kansas State University
- Kentucky State University
- Lincoln University (Missouri)
- Massachusetts Institute of Technology
- North Carolina A&T State University
- North Carolina State University
- Pennsylvania State University
- Prairie View A&M University
- Rutgers University
- South Carolina State University
- Tennessee State University
- Tuskegee University
- University of Alaska
- University of Arkansas
- University of California
- University of Delaware
- University of Florida
- University of Georgia
- University of Illinois
- University of Kentucky
- University of Maine
- University of Maryland
- University of Massachusetts
- University of Minnesota
- University of Missouri
- University of Nebraska
- University of New Hampshire
- University of Rhode Island
- University of South Carolina
- University of Tennessee
- University of Vermont
- Virginia Tech
- Washington State University
- West Virginia University
- Wisconsin State University

Thanks to Jeffrey Amelio, Jonathan Gaines, Jessica Gaines, Jesse Hendrickson and Wilfredo Rodriguez for their assistance.

Map by Benjamin Pearson for High Country News

Stunning land grants were unlocked from 99% of Minnesota's grant to territory ceded by Dakota chiefs in 1851. The selection committee's 150 square miles broken up into more than 300 parcels, scattered across 18 counties. It was a windfall for the state's future universities. Approximate gauges that land sold between $5 and $10 per acre. By the early 20th century, sales and leases raised nearly $880,000, equivalent to more than $93.5 million today. Through the cession of 1851, the Dakotas ceded less than 2.42 per acre for the same land.

By the early 20th century, sales and leases raised nearly $880,000, equivalent to more than $93.5 million today. Through the cession of 1851, the Dakota were paid less than 2.42 per acre for the same land.

The state assigned the endowment to the University of Minnesota in 1868. Founded as a proprietary school in 1851, the college shuttered due to debt and was rescued by the state in 1867 and 1868. Ramsey, the Morrill Act gov-to-be could "no do determining reason for the permanent establishment of the State university." For every dollar the United States claims to have spent to purchase Dakota title, the Morrill Act heaped $250 into the University of Minnesota's coffers — a return of 250 to 1. As a result of the Dakota cession, Minnesota's land-grant university would be richer than North Dakota, Nebraska, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Montana and Minnesota. In fiscal year 2009, the University of Minnesota's endowment was valued at $2.1 billion.

But consider the wider significance of the cession of 1851, and its grim aftermath, to the national land-grant university system. No other Indigenous cession provided land to more universities. Nearly 600,000 acres — 937 square miles — of the Dakota cession went to 52 land-grant universities — would help fund the endowment of 34 land-grant universities. Not land. Dakota furnished one out of every 12 acres redistributed under the Morrill Act.

Kahn Goudeau/High Country News

Yerba Buena Indian community, Tucson, Sonora.
PHOTO By: © KAHN GOUDEAU/HIGH COUNTRY NEWS
PHOTO By: © KAHN GOUDEAU/HIGH COUNTRY NEWS
CAPTION Ed Ives, a Shoshone Indian and Western Shoshone Nation Vice-Shoshonetown and Wildwater **PRESIDENT TRUCKER BUTTON** Colorado Sands, 2006. Ed and Dag, 2, 2005.
ASSIGNED Kahn Goudeau
FOR THE BENEFIT University of Minnesota
CREDIT Kahn Goudeau/High Country News
CAMERA Nikon D2X, Nikon 24-85mm

LOST GRANTS OF THE IVY LEAGUE

Financial returns could be lucrative even if states managed endowments from one university to another. This was the case with Brown and Yale universities, which received land-grant endowments in the 1860s but lost them to state universities in the 1890s.

Brown illustrates the impressive low end of the potential benefit of endowment transfers. Rhode Island's Dorr Rebellion created financial implications the state had to deal with before the institution. Here, the opposite is true. Brown's Treasurer's Report, 1891, lists the school's land-grant income at $1,000 per year, footing the school's total budget to $1,176. The decline appears to have contributed by a similar percentage today would require a gift of $500 million.

Yale was assigned the benefit of 180,000 acres of Morrill Act scrip, eventually redeemed from the former homelands of 13 tribal nations. That land was sold for $1.2 million, but Yale's trustees made bad and cronyfied tourism made between 1898 and 1906. Connecticut sold the entire lot in a block bid for $50,000, raised primarily at the expense of the Ojibwa and Odawa, whose hyperland land treaties contained more than 70% of what became the state's grant.

Interest from the fund provided scholarships for in-state students until Connecticut managed to the endowment to the University of Connecticut. Yale's trustees sued Connecticut in 1910 and lost. In 1914, Yale's trustees lost another lawsuit settlement for the full $125,000 plus interest, worth about $4.6 million in today's dollars.

Lost and found: The story of land-grant universities

Map & sources

Kahn Goudeau/High Country News

Kingston band of Ashcroft Wilderness, Tucson, Sonora.
PHOTO By: © KAHN GOUDEAU/HIGH COUNTRY NEWS
PHOTO By: © KAHN GOUDEAU/HIGH COUNTRY NEWS
CAPTION Ed Ives, a Shoshone Indian and Western Shoshone Nation Vice-Shoshonetown and Wildwater **PRESIDENT TRUCKER BUTTON** Colorado Sands, 2006. Ed and Dag, 2, 2005.
ASSIGNED Kahn Goudeau
FOR THE BENEFIT University of Minnesota
CREDIT Kahn Goudeau/High Country News
CAMERA Nikon D2X, Nikon 24-85mm

CALIFORNIA'S BOUNTY

In many places, the returns for Indigenous title is incalculable because nothing was paid for the land. Often, however, the extraordinary boon to land-grant universities was paid for by the sale of a small percentage of more than a third of land-grant colleges' land-grant endowments in California's passage.

Such was the case for the University of Arkansas. Founded as Arkansas Industrial University in 1871, the institution benefitted from almost 160,000 acres of scrip sold for $135,000 in 1872. More than 140 tribal nations had received $900 for the same land. Behind the stark disparity lie decades of forced labor, unpaid reservation annuities, when Indigenous communities were hunted and exterminated.

Boosters for Indigenous heads and scalps, paid by the state and reimbursed by the federal government, encouraged the cut-rate pay of traditional territories without any compensation. Meanwhile, 19 treaties made to secure land cessions in California were not ratified. Land acres for a half century by Congress.

"It's called genocide," claimed California Gov. Gavin Newsom, in last year when he issued a formal apology for the "dispossession and the attempted destruction of tribal communities."

Thirty-two land-grant universities got a share of California Indian land, including the University of California, Davis, which sold the state's share, then one-fifth for flying scrip schools like Virginia Tech, Louisiana State University and the University of Maine.

The University of California landed all of its grant among these stolen lands. To capitalize on its 150,000 acres, the university ran a real estate operation, selling off its holdings to settlers, speculators, railroad combinations of principal and interest payments. In the late 19th century, income from the fund — traceable to the lands of the Miwok, Yokuts, Cahuilleño, Mazda, Pomo and many more — covered as much as a third of the University of California's annual operating expenses.

By the time bill died in 1916, the university had sold all but 1,452 acres of its grant and the fund was falling in relevance. "From simple beginnings," the university noted at the school's 50th jubilee in 1918, "it has grown as it by magic."

Land-grant universities located in states that once managed land-grant endowments for other universities

Kahn Goudeau/High Country News

Ellagwood, Blackfoot, California.
PHOTO By: © KAHN GOUDEAU/HIGH COUNTRY NEWS
PHOTO By: © KAHN GOUDEAU/HIGH COUNTRY NEWS
CAPTION Ed Ives, a Shoshone Indian and Western Shoshone Nation Vice-Shoshonetown and Wildwater **PRESIDENT TRUCKER BUTTON** Colorado Sands, 2006. Ed and Dag, 2, 2005.
ASSIGNED Kahn Goudeau
FOR THE BENEFIT University of California
CREDIT Kahn Goudeau/High Country News
CAMERA Nikon D2X, Nikon 24-85mm

CORNELL, SCRIP KING

Despite its careful management, the University of California was not the greatest land-grant beneficiary in California. More than a quarter million acres of Cornell University's scrip were redeemed in California, most of it in the state's southern half, where it was sold to the agents of the most agriculturally productive state in the nation.

Ezra Cornell founded the university with a gold pen-pun. The state would kick in the initial grant if he would pony $500,000 to the school. It worked, and the university's namesake lost little time repurchasing the returns. Cornell's agents purchased 960,000 acres of scrip outright, speculated with it, and finished the profits into the university.

In an E-mail crowd sourcing in addition, a significantly higher profit than its nearest rivals. It would have been a bit higher, but 24 pieces of scrip were lost in the mail.

The land was taken from the Miwok, Wintun, Yokuts, Yokuts and other Indigenous nations of California in seasons. Funds were often generated so quickly that the university could not keep track of the interest it was earning. Within 20 years of its founding, Cornell had the third-largest endowment in the nation, behind Harvard and Yale. Its endowment tripled in 1894 after the endowment affiliated from "every thing that the pursuit of knowledge requires and money can buy."

Except, apparently, any recognition of the origins of the endowment. "Thank you for reaching out to us on this issue," wrote a Cornell spokesperson in response to this story. "Unfortunately, I have no information to share on this issue at this time."

Kalen Goodluck/High Country News

Discovery Park, Seattle, Washington.
PARCEL ID: 9124500000/0000000/0000000/0000
OWNERSHIP TRANSFER METHOD: Congress, Suquamish
INCREASED TRANSFER DATE: Land by treaty, Jan. 22, 1855
GRANTED TO: Duwamish People
FOR THE BENEFIT OF: Chinook University and South Carolina State University
AMOUNT PAID FOR INDIGENOUS TITLE: $0
AMOUNT BANKED FOR UNIVERSITY: $2500

STILL CASHING IN

It remains impossible to determine who raised the largest endowment principal from the Morrill lands, because not all those lands have been sold. While most scrip-stamps offloaded their land quickly, Western states tended to hold on to it longer, generating higher returns. There was never a deadline to sell.

Idaho, for instance, still manages an area larger than Manhattan — claimed by the United States through an 1863 treaty rejected then, and now, by the Nez Perce — for the benefit of the University of Idaho. With over 33,000 acres of its 90,000-acre grant left unsold, as well as another 70,000 acres of mineral rights, the university generated more than $330,000 in revenue in fiscal year 2019 alone.

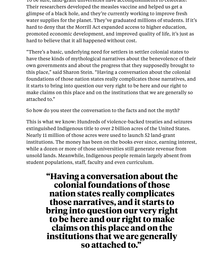
Montana State University still owns almost twice as much land as Idaho does, taken from the Blackfeet, Crow, Salish and Kootenai, Nez Perce, Cutbirdie and Gibbon. In fiscal year 2019, MSU made more than $630,000 from its approximately 63,000 remaining Morrill Act acres.

Meanwhile, Washington has retained nearly 80% of the original grant to fund Washington State University. No money was paid to the federal government to the Coeur d'Alene, Colville, Shoalwater Bay and Chehalis tribes for land supporting WSU. The Makah, Puget Sound Salish, Chemakuan, S'Klallam, Umatilla and Yakama received a combined $2,700 for their land cessions. In fiscal year 2019, the remaining lands generated $4.5 million for WSU, mostly from timber harvests.

Today, more than 500,000 acres unwittingly donated by tribal nations to land-grant colleges remain held in trust for at least 12 universities. In fiscal year 2019 alone, those lands produced more than $5.4 million in revenue for colleges.

Kalen Goodluck/High Country News

View from hill in Storm Bay, California.
PARCEL ID: 0123456/0000000/0000000
OWNERSHIP TRANSFER METHOD: Treaty, Cat-an-ish, Wa-wah, Ta-kam-ne
INCREASED TRANSFER DATE: Ceded by unratified treaty, June 9, 1851
GRANTED TO: Nisenan
FOR THE BENEFIT OF: Chinook University and South Carolina State University
AMOUNT PAID FOR INDIGENOUS TITLE: $0
AMOUNT BANKED FOR UNIVERSITY: $2700



Kalen Goodluck/High Country News

Private residences in Cayuga, Los Angeles, California.
PARCEL ID: 0123456/0000000/0000000
INDIGENOUS CARETAKERS: Tongva, Tataviam, Cat-an-ish, Gabrielino, Fernandeño
OWNERSHIP TRANSFER METHOD: Ceded by unratified treaty, June 10, 1851
GRANTED TO: Nisenan
FOR THE BENEFIT OF: University of California
AMOUNT PAID FOR INDIGENOUS TITLE: $0
AMOUNT BANKED FOR UNIVERSITY: $1,176,000

A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

A century after Ishi arrived at the University of California, a Lincoln impressionist hired for the Morrill Act's 150th anniversary explained how the act secured students' "right to rise" — Lincoln's creed. When Montana State University erected an 8-foot-tall stainless-steel statue of Lincoln in 2008, the crowd of thousand and chanted, "Go, Cats, Go!" With no shortage of land-grant anniversaries on the horizon, the celebrations show no sign of stopping.

To be sure, land-grant universities have accomplishments to celebrate: Their researchers developed the measles vaccine and helped us get a glimpse of a black hole, and they're currently working to improve fresh water supplies for the planet. They've graduated millions of students. If it's hard to deny that the Morrill Act expanded access to higher education, promoted economic development, and improved quality of life, it's just as hard to believe that it happened without cost.

"There's a basic, underlying need for settlers in settler colonial states to have these kinds of mythological narratives about the benevolence of their own governments and about the progress that they supposedly brought to this place," said Shawn Stein. "Having a conversation about the colonial foundations of those nation states really complicates those narratives, and it starts to bring into question our very right to be here and our right to make claims on this place and on the institutions that we are generally so attached to."

So how do you steer the conversation to the facts and not the myth?

This is what we know: Hundreds of violence-backed treaties and seizures extinguished Indigenous title to over 2 billion acres of the United States. Nearly 11 million of those acres were used to launch 52 land-grant institutions. The money has been on the books ever since, earning interest, while a dozen or more of those universities still generate revenue from unsold lands. Meanwhile, Indigenous people remain largely absent from student populations, staff, faculty and even curriculum.

> **"Having a conversation about the colonial foundations of those nation states really complicates those narratives, and it starts to bring into question our very right to be here and our right to make claims on this place and on the institutions that we are generally so attached to."**

In this context, Indigenous people are an inconvenient truth. If you look at the law and the treaties, then you raise an existential question about the United States and its very right to be here. It's a question most people would rather ignore.

Try this scenario, devised by Caicha Kisling Baldy (Iliapa/Yurok/Karuk) as a way for her students to better envision the dilemma. She's the department chair of Native American studies at Humboldt State University in California.

Imagine this: Your roommate's boyfriend comes in one day and steals your computer. He uses it in front of you, and when you point out it's your computer, not his, he disagrees. He found it. You weren't using it. It's his.

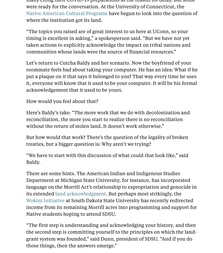
"How long until you can let that go?" she asks. "How long until you're like, 'Never mind, I guess that's your computer now.'"

Now imagine that's what happened to your land.

"How long are we supposed to not say, 'This is the land that you stole, so you don't get to claim ownership of it, and then feel really proud of yourself that you're using it for education?'" Baldy said.

In fact, the evidence of Indigenous dispossession and the role of land-grant universities in that expropriation has been hiding in plain sight.

"Whether they realize it or not, every person who's ever gone through a 4-H in America owes that experience to the benefits of the land-grant system," said Jerry Dunn (Rosebud Sioux), president of South Dakota State University. "And the land-grant system has, at its core, the land that was provided."



Kalen Goodluck/High Country News

View of Storm Bay, California, from the basketball court.
PARCEL ID: 0123456/0000000/0000000
OWNERSHIP TRANSFER METHOD: Treaty, Cat-an-ish, Wa-wah, Ta-kam-ne
INCREASED TRANSFER DATE: Ceded by unratified treaty, June 9, 1851
GRANTED TO: Bear or South Carolina
FOR THE BENEFIT OF: Chinook University and South Carolina State University
AMOUNT PAID FOR INDIGENOUS TITLE: $0
AMOUNT BANKED FOR UNIVERSITY: $2,700

Less than half of the universities we contacted about this story responded, many citing their COVID-19 preparations as the reason for delay. But some were ready for the conversation. At the University of Connecticut, the Native American Cultural Programs have begun to look into the question of where the institution got its land.

"The topics you raised are of great interest to us here at UConn, so your timing is excellent in asking," a spokesperson said. "But we have not yet taken actions to explicitly acknowledge the impact on tribal nations and communities whose lands were the source of financial resources."

Let's return to Caicha Baldy and her scenario. Now the boyfriend of your roommate feels bad about taking your computer. He has an idea. What if he put a plaque on it that says it belonged to you? That was every time he uses it, everyone will know that it used to be your computer. It will be his formal acknowledgement that it used to be yours.

How would you feel about that?

Here's Baldy's take: "The more work that we do with decolonization and reconciliation, the more you start to realize there is no reconciliation without the return of stolen land. It doesn't work otherwise."

But how would that work? There's the question of the legality of broken treaties, but a bigger question is: Why aren't we trying?

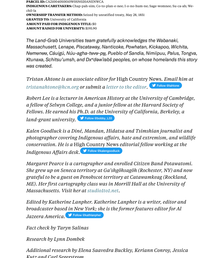
"We have to start with this discussion of what could that look like," said Baldy.

There are some hints. The American Indian and Indigenous Studies Department at Michigan State University, for instance, has incorporated language on the Morrill Act's relationship to expropriation and genocide in its extended land acknowledgment. But perhaps most strikingly, the Wokini Initiative at South Dakota State University has received historical income from its remaining Morrill acres into programming and support for Native students hoping to attend SDSU.

"The first step is understanding and acknowledging your history, and then the second step is committing yourself to the principles on which the land-grant system was founded," said Dunn, president of SDSU. "And if you do those things, then the answers emerge."

In fiscal year 2019, Morrill lands still held by South Dakota produced nearly $636,000 in revenue. Through the Wokini Initiative, that money now goes to Indigenous students.

"You can't go back and change the beginning," Dunn said. "But you can start today and change the ending."



Kalen Goodluck/High Country News

Nico Carlson Rolfsen, Sonni Cho.
PARCEL ID: 0123456/0000000/0000000
INDIGENOUS CARETAKERS: Chaqi pak-ish, Cat-an-ish (also a-nun-i, i-an-bum-ni, Sugar minimum; Ka-ri-ish, Wa-wah)
OWNERSHIP TRANSFER METHOD: Ceded by unratified treaty, May 28, 1851
GRANTED TO: University of California
AMOUNT PAID FOR INDIGENOUS TITLE: $0
AMOUNT BANKED FOR UNIVERSITY: $1,176,000

The Land-Grab Universities team gratefully acknowledges the Wabanaki, Massachusett, Lenape, Piscataway, Haminoche, Powhatan, Kickapoo, Miami, Nemenee, Cáugiz, Niu-agthe-tree-pa, Pueblo of Sandia, Nimiipuu, Paiute, Tongva, Ktunaxa, Scitsu'umsh, and Ta'Oke'ledul peoples, on whose homelands this story was created.

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Download the full database: https://github.com/HCNData/landgrabs-data

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Note: This story has been updated to clarify the tribal nations that ceded land in Missoula, Montana.

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