

House Government & Veterans Affairs Committee

House Bill 1603

Andrew Alexis Varvel

Written Testimony

January 31, 2025

Chairman Schauer and Members of the Committee:

My name is Andrew Alexis Varvel.

I live in Bismarck, District 47.

I think this bill is a good start.

Soon after the very founding of the University of North Dakota, UND has gotten itself into this big mess by raiding tombs of indigenous people here. Professor Montgomery used his expeditions to promote racist pseudoscience, and his tradition of disrespect toward local culture endured well into the twentieth century.

The sooner we can get this process started, the better. The sooner we can get this process finished in an orderly and respectful manner, the better. The University of North Dakota is not alone in this embarrassing legacy, as many high status institutions are also complicit in this disgrace. What we can do as a state is comply with federal NAGPRA regulations to make sure this crisis is dealt with.

I am also concerned about the Fraine Barracks, which serves as the headquarters of the North Dakota National Guard. That building was once the site of the Bismarck Indian School.

I very much hope there could be a noninvasive seismic scan of those grounds to discover whether children's bodies are buried there.

Quite honestly, I have no clue how many dead children are buried on the grounds of the Fraine Barracks, but it behooves us all to find out. It behooves us all to do this ourselves rather than waiting for the federal government to finance this. We have the money for it.

It will be important to consult with the survivors of deceased children discovered at federal boarding schools. Some families may prefer to let the bodies stay where they are. Other families may prefer to bring their remains home. This process will be traumatic, so it will naturally require patience and cultural empathy.

So yes, I think this appropriation is a good start. I will not pretend to regard this process as anything close to a panacea. Hard feelings will linger from previous generations of contempt, and indeed some Indians have internalized those feelings of contempt toward themselves to the point where they publicly shame non-Indians for making the effort to learn indigenous languages and speak them.

I hope that the long lost scalp of White Eyebrows, so prominent in George Catlin's collection, can eventually be repatriated to his relatives among the Mandan. I hope that the language of White Eyebrows will continue to be spoken well – and far – into the future.

Please give House Bill 1603 a **DO PASS** recommendation.

Thank you.