

Senate State & Local Government Committee

House Bill 1603

Andrew Alexis Varvel

March 27, 2025

Madame Chairman Roers &
Members of the Committee:

My name is Andrew Alexis Varvel.

I am a historian who lives in Bismarck.

This bill is a good start.

Although I understand why this appropriation was cut down from the original proposal, I am still disappointed.

It appears that the State Historical Society of North Dakota has a large inventory of Indian bodies and artifacts. Some of it comes from legitimate donations over a long period of time by local Indians to the state museum. Some of it comes from a sordid and utterly embarrassing history of tomb raiding that started with the very founding of the University of North Dakota.

The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act must be obeyed. The sooner our state can finish this process in an orderly and respectful manner, the better. I am particularly concerned with the Fraine Barracks, which serves as the headquarters of the North Dakota National Guard.

Fraine Barracks once served as the site of the Bismarck Indian School. I would be favorably surprised if there were no bodies of children there. I very much hope that the State of North Dakota could eventually fund noninvasive seismic scanning of those grounds to discover whether children's bodies are buried there.

If one compares even the original request to the amount of money that the State of North Dakota derives from severance taxes on petroleum from the Mandan Hidatsa Arikara Nation, it is very little.

I very much hope that the long lost scalp of White Eyebrows, once so prominent in George Catlin's collection and probably somewhere in federal collections in Washington, can eventually be repatriated to his relatives among the Mandan.

I very much hope that Professor Montgomery's excavations of burial mounds that he used to promote the idea of a pre-Indian civilization here, including excavations in and around what is now called Devils Lake and another mound just south of downtown Grand Forks, can be recovered. I suspect that those remains were probably Hidatsa, and most likely to be found at the University of Toronto with a lesser chance of something being found at the University of Utah.

We should definitely pass this legislation. We should definitely fund this legislation. At least this bill allows a process to get set up for later cooperation. As written, I perceive this bill to be stingy. I hope that future sessions of the Legislature will be more generous.

Please give House Bill 1603 a **DO PASS** recommendation. Thank you for your time, and I am open for questions from this committee.