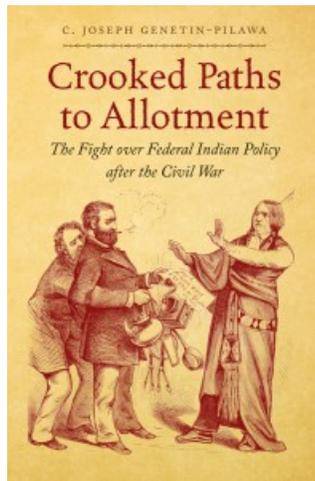


Crooked Paths to Allotment: Q&A with Author C. Joseph Genetin-Pilawa
October 2nd, 2012 - Posted by Natasha Varner



In [Crooked Paths to Allotment: The Fight over Federal Indian Policy after the Civil War](#), C. Joseph Genetin-Pilawa complicates standard narratives of nineteenth century Native American history by uncovering the stories of individuals who contested federal Indian policy and proposed viable alternatives during a critical moment in its development. Genetin-Pilawa focuses on reformers and activists, including Tonawanda Seneca Ely S. Parker and Council Fire editor Thomas A. Bland, whose contributions to Indian policy debates have heretofore been underappreciated. Genetin-Pilawa's interventions into the historical narrative as it has been traditionally construed have the potential to change how we see and study American Indian engagement with government processes in the nineteenth century and beyond. Here, Dr. Genetin-Pilawa discusses his research, some of the key insights he gained, and his latest work.

How did you arrive at this research project?

Originally, I imagined writing a book that focused solely on the National Indian Defense Association and its efforts in the 1880s to block the passage of forced allotment legislation. I became fascinated with Thomas and Cora Bland, the founders of the organization, and their campaign against the “Friends of the Indian,” a story that had been glossed over in the existing literature.



Author C. Joseph Genetin-Pilawa.

As these things go, however, the questions I was asking encouraged me to move backwards chronologically. Where did the Blands’ radicalism come from? Were there other individuals working within federal governance that actively questioned the trajectory, pace, and goals of the policies directed at Native communities, and offered viable alternatives? If so, what could we learn from their stories? This led me to ask similar questions of Ely Parker, a Tonawanda Seneca condolee chief and the first Indigenous commissioner of Indian Affairs, and his efforts to shape federal policy in the years surrounding the Civil War.

What inspired you to center your research on Ely Parker and Thomas Bland over other individuals?

There are several reasons why I find these individuals to be so compelling. I discussed the Blands above, but Parker’s life was

so immensely interesting as well. He had many careers (interpreter for Seneca diplomats, conduced chief, engineer, military bureaucrat, policymaker, clerk). He lived and studied with other Haudenosaunee people in Ontario, worked on the Erie Canal, studied law in western New York, oversaw the building of customs houses and other federal buildings in Iowa, Illinois, Michigan, and Virginia, fought in the Civil War, lived in Washington DC at several different moments and then later in New York City, working for the NYPD and spending time with Jacob Riis.

Parker and Bland were also controversial figures—even their historical legacies are contested. They didn't (and don't) fit into our standard narratives of nineteenth-century policy reform, assimilation, dispossession, and assaults on sovereignty. But because they don't fit, I think they force us to look at these narratives with fresh eyes and ask new questions. In much of the historical literature on the mid-to-late nineteenth century, Parker and Bland are constructed as outliers, individuals who made little impact. Yet if we look at the historical record, it's clear that they built strong alliances and had significant support for their ideas. In both cases, their enemies clearly viewed them as threats and worked intensely to repress their reform agendas. Even though they lost more political battles than they won, studying their techniques, motivations, and struggles enriches and improves our interpretations.

How does the act of “peopling” history help disrupt the misconception that Federal Indian Policy developed in a linear trajectory?

It reminds us that policy did not develop in a vacuum and that individuals drove this process in real time, responding often to what they perceived as the most important needs either of Native communities or themselves (sometimes both). Early in

the conceptualization of this project, I found myself coming back to a couple of general ideas that I had read over and over again in the secondary literature. The first was the belief that to be “pro-Indian” in the post-Civil War was to be “pro-assimilation” and “pro-allotment.” Second, that the eastern philanthropists who became known as the “Friends of the Indian” were “well-meaning, but perhaps ill-informed.”

However, in my research, I kept encountering individuals and actions that didn’t fit these models and those who did, did so in a more complicated way. For example, one could argue that at various moments Ely Parker supported assimilation and allotment, but his support for these ideas was limited to specific contexts and he ultimately argued against both. And while I think it makes sense to understand some of the “Friends” to have been well intentioned at least some of the time, there is lots of evidence to suggest that their intentions were by no means always altruistic.

The two individuals you focused on were men, but were there any Native women who were involved on the political scene – either at national or local levels?

There were absolutely Indigenous women working in Native policy reform, some of whom we might think of as prominent, as well as many more that worked behind-the-scenes, or who left fewer records for historians today. I think that Sarah Winnemucca would be a good example of a Native woman who was involved politically, both locally and more nationally in the time period I discuss ([Siobhan Senier](#), as well as others have written convincingly of Winnemucca’s importance).

If we look at some of the earlier events I address, including the Ogden Land Company’s campaign to remove the Tonawanda Seneca from their homelands from 1838-1857, we must also

take seriously the role that clan mothers played in influencing the decisions Tonawanda leaders made and the strategies they employed (recently [Laurence Hauptman](#) has issued calls to historians to pay more attention to the roles these women played).

There were other women working in Native policy reform as well, including well-known individuals like Helen Hunt Jackson and members of the Women's National Indian Association (some of whom Cathleen Cahill references in [Federal Fathers and Mothers](#)). I tried to say as much as I could about Cora Bland, Thomas' wife, partner, and co-editor, who played an important role in shaping both the National Indian Defense Association's platform and the approach that Thomas Bland took in his reform campaigns. I wish I could find more about her thoughts and influence, but the historical record is scant.

You mention that both Parker and Bland introduced ideas that didn't always have immediate success but that sometimes developed and had greater influence over time. Can you give us an example of that?

The biggest example that comes to mind is the opposition these men held toward dispossession and land allotment. Both men challenged these ideas but ultimately faced defeats in the face of a broader movement toward these policies during their lives and careers. However, based on the kinds of arguments they made in favor of supporting tribal sovereignty and maintaining tribal homelands and land bases, both of them would likely have supported John Collier and the Wheeler-Howard Act in 1934 that effectively ended the allotment era.

Another example would be Parker's arguments in support of what today would be called a classical, liberal arts education for Native students (something he pursued as a youth in New York

State) and Bland's support of the same. In some ways, Parker's ideas can be viewed within a larger framework of immediate post-Civil War Reconstruction politics that included important educational developments through the Freedman's Bureau. Bland's focus on a more well-rounded educational experience for Native students can be juxtaposed against the efforts of Herbert Welsh and the Indian Rights Association, who advocated a strictly vocational education.

Were there any signs of alliance building between figures like Parker and Bland with other individuals from marginalized groups?

This question brings to mind a few examples. Following the Civil War, Parker traveled around the South with General Grant and in doing so came into contact with communities of freed people. Although he did not work directly with them, he expressed concern about conditions in which they had been forced to live and took an interest in the development of Reconstruction policy as well. He wrote in 1866, for example, about the importance of keeping military troops in the South, for "the protection of the emancipated race."

Thomas Bland identified with Midwestern farmers and populist agrarian activists, at one point writing a kind of "party biography" for the Peoples (Populist) Party. Among other issues, Bland advocated for banking and currency reform, as well as the break-up of monopolies. These ideas fit with his notions of a protective state, fears of uncontrolled capitalism, and support for democratic self-determination.

In your current research, you're looking at Native American presence in nineteenth-century D.C. – could you talk a little about your preliminary findings?

I received a US Capitol Historical Society fellowship this summer to begin research in earnest on a project I'm tentatively calling "The Indians' Capital City." At first glance, the premise of the project seems simple: In the nineteenth century, it was not uncommon for Indigenous people to travel to and reside in Washington D.C. Of course, these kinds of stories are rarely simple. In this book, I am examining the hidden tensions between the commemorative and lived landscape that developed as Washington City increasingly became a symbol of the United States. Or to put it another way, as the capital came to be the physical manifestation of a national imaginary in the nineteenth century, the disjuncture between the iconographic/symbolic program of the capital (artwork, architecture, drama, tourist guidebooks, and newspaper reportage) and the actual experiences of Native and non-Native people in the city grew in profound ways that reflected a similar process occurring on a broader scale across the country.

As a case study of place and commemoration in the nineteenth century, Washington D.C. is an interesting choice. Place matters, a lot. D.C., though, was not a place where people came *from*, but where they *ended up*, often for short periods, sometimes longer. In the case of the commemorative landscape, the portrayals of Native violence, as well as the iconographic message of a conquest completed, came from the minds of European artists and the US policymakers who commissioned them. These portrayals were not only significant as a symbolic justification for actual federal policies but came to represent an emerging cultural mythology along the physical landscape of the national imaginary. Here, Euro-American men claimed ownership of the city (and the nation) and decorated it with images of conquest. Yet they were never successful in commanding the city (or the nation) in a way that precluded the claims of others. Commemorative expressions also hid a much more complex and interesting lived landscape in which

Native people encountered and confronted non-Native individuals, urban spaces, and the symbols of settler society in Washington City.

Has anything you've found in that research shed light on or expanded your understanding of the development of Federal Indian policy or any of your other findings included in *Crooked Paths to Allotment*?

I'm still in a relatively early stage of the research, but a couple of ideas come to mind. First, and this strikes me as the more "standard" interpretation of the materials I'm studying currently, the iconographic displays—the reliefs, statues, paintings, as well as plays and guidebook language seemed to be used to justify and legitimize the kinds of policies that were being developed in the nineteenth century (I'm thinking, of course, about violent conquest, removal, dispossession, and coercive assimilation).

The more interesting story—and it is here that I think I can make an intervention into this literature—is that Native visitors and inhabitants marked the landscape in their own ways in Washington D.C. and, in doing so, challenged the narratives of settler colonialism and carved out their own place within this evolving imperial capital. While the subject matter differs in some major way, conceptually or methodologically I think there is a certain resonance from my first book to this project.

You participated in the First Peoples manuscript workshop, with Kevin Bruyneel as your mentor. Did you learn anything about the dissertation revision process or any general writing tips that might be of use to other scholars writing their first books?

The manuscript workshop was incredibly helpful. Kevin Bruyneel and Jean Dennison (my workshop co-participant), as well as Mark Simpson-Vos (my editor at UNC Press) offered great suggestions and feedback on parts of the book. In terms of general advice, we spent a lot of time talking about finding and asserting one's own authorial voice. The dissertation genre is not really set up to do that—one must demonstrate (to a specific audience comprised of one's own dissertation committee) an engagement with all the requisite literature and so there's a lot of time spent positioning oneself in the historiography.

In the case of my own dissertation, all of the historiographic positioning had been foregrounded and the unique and interesting elements of my arguments didn't come through as much as I would've liked. Kevin and Jean pushed me to bring out my own voice more strongly. In addition, Kevin offered a piece of advice in constructing a useful introduction (full disclosure: the advice comes from [Pagan Kennedy](#), through Kevin, which he acknowledged). He said that, as an author, you can do anything in your book—and readers will want to come with you—but you have to be an attentive guide. He asked Jean and me to imagine standing behind the reader with our hands on their shoulders, gently escorting them through the argument. It's an image that works for me and I've tried to share it with others as well.

—C. Joseph Genetin-Pilawa is assistant professor of history at Illinois College. His book, [*Crooked Paths to Allotment: The Fight over Federal Indian Policy after the Civil War*](#), is now available for pre-order and will be published October 22.

This post was co-published on the [University of North Carolina Press blog](#).

Joseph Genetin-Pilawa: “Documented Rights” & Representations of Indigenous History in the Archive

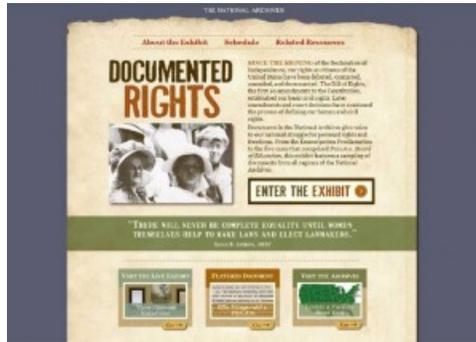
Posted by [Ellen](#) on [14 December 2011, 9:58 am](#)

[This article is crossposted from [FirstPeoplesNewDirections.org.](#)]

This past November, historian Joseph Genetin-Pilawa participated in a symposium on federal Indian affairs at the newly dedicated St. Louis branch of the National Archives. The panel coincided with the opening of a new NARA exhibit entitled “Documented Rights” (complete exhibit [viewable online here](#)) and included historians Flannery Burke and Frederick Fausz, in addition to Genetin-Pilawa. This was the second in a series of panel discussions addressing civil and human rights struggles of African Americans, Native Americans, immigrants from various parts of world, working class activists, and women as they relate to the exhibit. In this guest post, Dr. Genetin-Pilawa, whose new book will be published by UNC Press into the First Peoples, New Directions in Indigenous Studies initiative next fall, contextualizes the exhibit within broader Native American histories and illustrates some of the potential pitfalls of inclusion in a linear, multicultural archival exhibit.

**“Documented Rights” and Representations of Indigenous
History in the Archive**

By Joseph Genetin-Pilawa



The online exhibit

[“Documented Rights”](#) tells a story about the ways that diverse people have struggled “for personal rights and freedoms.” Its narrative is constructed using historical records held in fourteen National Archives locations across the United States, including digital facsimiles of photographs, telegrams, speeches, letters, court documents, ship manifests, congressional papers, and more. The exhibit begins with the Civil War era—focusing on slavery, emancipation, and Reconstruction—then moves chronologically through time to address issues related to immigration, suffrage campaigns, working class activism, Japanese-American relocation, and the Civil Rights Movement of the postwar era. Within this timeline, the creators of “Documented Rights” have also attempted to incorporate the history of Native people.

Interestingly, visitors first encounter Indigenous people by viewing records related to the Indian Citizen Act of 1924. These documents, along with a photo of Comanche Quanah Parker and the Constitution of the Mission Indian Federation, are situated between and among photographs of Susan B. Anthony and suffrage parades, enemy alien registration forms, a picture of Eugene V. Debs, and a brochure about World War II Japanese internment. Within the larger mosaic of records and images, the struggle and hardships experienced by Native Americans might appear to “fit.” After all, museums and public spaces have often simply omitted a Native presence. This

exhibit, it seems, has made a conscious effort to rectify that omission. I have to wonder, though, is the 1924 Indian Citizenship Act really a good starting point for this inclusion? Should “inclusion” even be the goal for curators of an online exhibit such as this one? And, could simply “fitting” the Native experience into a linear narrative of inclusion ever work?

When I was first asked to participate in a panel at the St. Louis National Archives branch, I had not yet viewed “Documented Rights.” Truth be told, being invited to speak in the hallowed halls of a NARA branch (albeit in this case a glistening new building on the west side of St. Louis) was exciting, while the prospect of critiquing the exhibit was somewhat anxiety provoking. As an American of settler/immigrant ancestry as well as a scholar of Indigenous studies who spends a lot of time doing archival research, I often struggle with the archive as an institution. This is especially true of the federal archival system. It occupies problematic space. On one hand, it catalogs, organizes, and maintains records that the settler colonial government has used to make populations legible thus facilitating dispossession, extractive labor, and coercive assimilation policies. On the other hand, archives also, often unknowingly, preserve evidence of a colonial-settler state that allows Indigenous people to critique, shape, and resist oppression. Examining the exhibit itself illustrates both of these points.

Studying Indigenous history in light of federal policy and United States development is wrought with unique pitfalls that make fitting it into a multicultural national narrative problematic, especially when that story is depicted as a celebratory and linear march toward universal inclusion. Historian Donald Fixico sees federal Indian affairs as an oscillating pendulum, not a linear timeline—policymakers shifting between full inclusion on one end and complete marginalization/exclusion on the other.

Fixico argues that, while this paradigm allows for an easy periodization of federal policy development, the wide sweep of that pendulum has often obscured as much as it has revealed.^[1] Author Kevin Bruyneel suggests that this polar paradigm is a reflection of “American colonial ambivalence,” an inability on the part of policymakers to allow Indigenous people to exist in contemporary political time and space.^[2] It would seem, then, that “fitting” Native American history within a linear narrative of inclusion is a bit like fitting a square peg into a round hole.

“Documented Rights,” like so many other museum/archival exhibits, unfortunately seems to fall into this trap. United States citizenship rights were no doubt profoundly important to former slaves and new immigrants. And voting rights were of utmost significance to the white female activists and male labor leaders who appear in the exhibit. Yet, Indigenous history does not weave so easily into this larger tapestry of “inclusion.”

Section 3 of the exhibit, with the unintentionally ironic title, “This Land is Your Land,” focuses on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and asserts, “New immigrants and long-term residents struggled to assimilate as well as overcome social inequalities and injustices.” For Native people, the exhibit states, “inherent rights were not recognized until the 20th century . . . [when] Native Americans became citizens of the United States.” This implies that only U.S. citizenship could confer rights for Native people. And this is a tenuous implication, especially considering the fact that every one of the nearly 400 treaties that U.S. officials signed with Native nations recognized sovereignty and the inherent rights of Indigenous people (many of these treaties are even housed in the federal archives). Citizenship within the U.S. body politic factored nowhere in this equation, and when it did become a factor, it often required Indigenous people to forego or denounce citizenship rights within their own nations. I’m not

saying that the 1924 Citizenship Act wasn't important, but instead, I'm suggesting there is a danger here of flattening the contours and complexities of the Indigenous experience so that it "fits" within a celebratory multicultural American narrative, rather than pushing to change the narrative fundamentally to reflect the deep and rich landscape of Native American history. I think we can do better.

It's important to remember that "Documented Rights," even as a virtual exhibit, is presented in a linear form—its stories told through a chronological narrative. Breaking that narrative seems easier in written scholarship, where authors are able to present complicated ideas through prose and literary conventions not typically employed in the physical space of a museum. In my own work, I focus attention on Indigenous and non-Indigenous reformers after the Civil War who envisioned a relationship between Native communities and the U.S. in which U.S. citizenship was not necessarily an endpoint, or even a goal. I call these men and women "alternative reformers" because they presented viable, genuine policy alternatives within mainstream systems of government. These individuals often exist at the margins of current historical literature because they don't easily fit into narratives of inclusion. My book, (tentatively entitled) *Contested Characters and the Crooked Paths to Allotment*, upends the conventional story by moving them to the center and by investigating both the campaigns they won and lost. "Documented Rights," as a virtual exhibit rather than a physical place, could have employed similar conventions and reordered time and space. On the walls of museums or in the cabinets of exhibits, linearity works (and perhaps it's even necessary to usher an audience through an orderly physical space that requires a beginning and an end), but cyberspace is different. The visitor has the ability to navigate alternate paths and stories. So why has it been so

difficult to upend the structures that have driven museum design and form?

As I was reading through Chickasaw theorist Jodi Byrd's new book *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism*, I thought about how the ways she writes and thinks about Indigeneity might relate to the exhibit. Byrd offers a sophisticated and thoughtful exploration of the problems associated with conflating Indigeneity and racial identity. Building upon work by Kanaka Maoli scholar J. Kehaulani Kauanui and Ojibwe scholar Jean O'Brien, Byrd writes that when Indigenous identity becomes simply another racial category, Native assertions of sovereignty and land rights disappear. In place of sovereignty then, citizenship within the colonizing state, as seen in "Documented Rights," fills the void.^[3]

If trying to fit the Native experience into a broader framework that includes immigrants, labor activists, freed peoples, internment victims, and suffragists is so dangerous, what's a historian, archivist, or curator to do? And here it is: I think we have to acknowledge that complexity, not shy away from it. As author Paul Chaat Smith (Comanche), one of the curators at the National Museum of the American Indian (a space that has attempted to rethink what a museum does), writes in his thought-provoking book *Everything You Know About Indians is Wrong*, "Simply reversing bogus binaries doesn't get us anywhere. The project isn't about the good guys being bad, and the bad guys being good, but about finding new ways of seeing and thinking about the history that is all around us."^[4] I think "Documented Rights" gives us a chance to acknowledge this complexity, that's part of why it's important and worth a look. The Mission Indian Federation Constitution and Adam Castillo's 1925 letter regarding internal sovereignty serve as clear indications that there were alternate ideas that diverged from

the artificial binaries we've constructed. For example, the Mission Indian Federation met and negotiated with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, but at the same time, took as their slogan "Human Rights and Home Rule."

The virtual exhibit "Documented Rights" raises some interesting challenges for scholars and museum professionals alike. It also reminds us that the struggle "for personal rights and freedoms" means something different for Indigenous people. While NARA should be congratulated for its attempt to do some justice to representing the Native experience, "Documented Rights" sheds light on the difficulty of doing so without replicating settler-colonial/archival patterns of organizing, categorizing, and flattening those histories. Rather than "documenting" rights—a process that privileges the kinds of written records held in archives—a better starting point might be "defining" what a healthy relationship between Native communities and the federal state might look like and seeking input from Indigenous nations while departing from linear models of representation.

An alternate approach to presenting Indigenous histories in cyberspace can be seen in the new exhibit "[Indians of the Midwest](#)," hosted by the Newberry Library and curated by D'Arcy McNickle Center Director Scott Stevens. It contextualizes its stories within a [United States national narrative](#), but puts the Native perspective at the center of the visitor experience. Viewers are encouraged to navigate the exhibit across time and Native histories are situated in the present, as much as the past. This exhibit, I believe, offers an excellent model for representing Indigenous histories in a digital environment.

Joseph Genetin-Pilawa is assistant professor of history at Illinois College. His forthcoming book, currently titled Contested

Characters and the Crooked Paths to Allotment, *will be published by the University of North Carolina Press in fall 2012.*

Related

[2012 UNC Press American Indian Heritage Month Reading List](#)In "American History"

[Interview: C. Joseph Genetin-Pilawa on Crooked Paths to Allotment](#)In "American History"

[William Bauer on writing American Indian history from home](#)In "American History"

1. ^[1] Fixico, Donald, "Federal and State Policies and American Indians." In *A Companion to American Indian History*, edited by Philip Deloria and Neal Salisbury, 379. Wiley-Blackwell, 2004. [↵](#)
2. ^[2] Bruyneel, Kevin. *The Third Space of Sovereignty: The Postcolonial Politics of U.S.-Indigenous Relations*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 10. [↵](#)
3. ^[3] Byrd, Jodi. *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xxiii-xxiv. [↵](#)
4. ^[4] Smith, Paul Chaat. *Everything You Know about Indians is Wrong*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 75. [↵](#)

Filed under [American History](#), [Author blog entry](#), [Guest Bloggers](#), [History](#), [Media Studies](#), [Native Amer./Indigenous Studies](#) | Tagged [documentary](#), [joseph genetin-pilawa](#), [museum studies](#) | [Comment](#) | [Permalink](#)