Wolastoqey grandmothers Alma Brooks and Ramona Nicholas following the ceremony at the location of the Sussex Vale Indian School on July 1, 2021. Photo by Aditya Rao.

As thousands across the country, including in Fredericton and Saint John, gathered to mark “Resilience Day” in place of Canada Day, as a way to reflect and act on the discovery of unmarked graves of children who attended the country’s residential schools, 50 people attended a sombre ceremony organized by the Peace and Friendship Alliance on the grounds of the Trinity Anglican Church, the former site of the Sussex Vale Indian School.

“The ceremony we shared with local residents of Sussex along with our graceful allies was a seed we have planted in order for us to press reset and rebuild Peace and Friendship relations,” said Wolastoqewi Kci-Sakom spasaqsit possemsom, also known as Ron Tremblay, Wolastoq Grand Chief morningstar burning.

Wearing orange shirts, some saying, “It’s ok now, they found us,” members of the Peace and Friendship Alliance, including the Wolastoqiyik, Mi’kmqaw and L’Nu, settlers, newcomers and children, spent the afternoon in a traditional ceremony around silver maple, one of which had a window from the Sussex Vale Indian School leaning against it.

While there were no residential schools in the province of New Brunswick, there were day/residential schools like the one in Chatham, now Miramichi, where Indigenous boys did stay and went to a school run by the Catholic Church. Day/residential schools were established near reserves in the province, the last of which closed in 1992 near Metepenagiag.

The New England Company operated the first day/residential school in the province, the Sussex Vale Indian School.

The New England Company, also known as the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in New England, was created in England in 1649 with the purpose of converting people in the British colony to protestantism. According to W.S. McNutt’s New Brunswick, A History: 1784-1867, the Wolastoqiyik (Maliseets) were a problem for the settlers and the school offered a solution to their protests to the settler encroachment of their land.

In 1787, when Loyalists were arriving in New Brunswick following the American Revolution, the New England Company formed a board of commissioners tasked with buying land for Indian schools, first in Sussex Vale then later in Woodstock, Sheffiled, St. Andrews, Miramichi and other locations. Board members included New Brunswick elite: Thomas Carleton, the province’s first lieutenant-governor; Rev. Jonathan Odell; Ward Chipman, New Brunswick’s solicitor general; and Chief Justice George Duncan Ludlow.

The day schools and day-residential schools had the same objective as the residential schools: to assimilate Indigenous people into settler society. In 1920, Duncan Campbell Scott, head of Indian Affairs and a chief architect of Canada’s Residential Schools, said, “I want to get rid of the Indian problem.... Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department, that is the whole object of this Bill.”

In 1920, before Scott made residential schools mandatory for all Indigenous children, ages seven to fifteen, there was the Sussex Vale Indian School that was supposed to school Indigenous children with the purpose of assimilating them and converting them to Protestantism. The Sussex Vale Indian School did house children, the likely result of funds the New England Company to train the Indigenous children in a trade and take care of them, but many children became farm workers and domestic servants rather than apprentices.

Nicole O’Byrne is an associate professor of law at the University of New Brunswick who has been conducting research on the Sussex Vale Indian School. According to documents uncovered by O’Byrne, settlers received money in the amounts of 20 pounds a year from the New England Company to train the Indigenous children to Protestantism. Indigenous parents of the children had followed their children and settled along the Kennebecasis River, near the Sussex school, and sometimes they would get back their children. The New England Company blamed the failing conversion mission on the indigenous children returning home to their families after school, so, in 1807, the Sussex Vale Indian School introduced a new program that combined schooling with indentured servitude.

O’Byrne has noted that the program was beneficial for the settlers. With no limit to the number of children a family could have, Rev. Arnold, the head of the school, had five or six children stay with his family. Children as young as eight months old were taken to live with settlers and their parents were paid a stipend to stay away. One contract uncovered by O’Byrne found that one child was contracted to work for a farmer until he was 21. The documents also point to numerous cases of sexual exploitation of girls.

Andrea Bear Nicholas, professor emeritus of native studies at St. Thomas University, likens the program to slavery. She said the children never learned to read or write while they were also being forced to abandon their Indigenous language.
In videos that can be viewed on the Facebook page, Union News Channel, CUPE front-line workers react to news that the New Brunswick government is handing out multimillion-dollar contracts to big companies to pay their power bills while the government refuses to increase their wages.

CUPE members are losing money every year because their wages do not keep up with the rising cost of living. Hundreds of union positions are unfilled as qualified New Brunswickers choose to work outside the province where wages are fair.

Major recruitment and retention problems mean that many public sector workplaces in New Brunswick do not have enough staff, and existing staff are struggling to fill the gaps.

CUPE leadership says this situation must end, the time has come to draw the line.

CUPE NB president Steve Drost announced at a media event in late May that Premier Higgs has until Labour Day in September to fix recruitment issues and bring fair wages to the 21,860 CUPE members in bargaining. More than 5,800 workers are now in deadlock, and more than 13,280 are headed for conciliation in the next two months. 

It is totally wrong that these workers are being forced to choose between survival and dignity, said Drost, if the Premier and his cabinet refuse to act in a fair, reasonable and responsible way, once these 100 days have passed CUPE members will have to mount a province-wide coordinated industrial action, forcing job action on the citizens of New Brunswick.

This ultimatum as far as we are concerned is the most responsible way to get this government to do what it needs to do. By September, most residents will already be vaccinated, a hundred days is more than generous, considering that most of these workers have been waiting up to four years to get a contract.

Wages are losing buying power

According to Statistics Canada, since 2017 the cost of living has gone up every year. A basket of goods that cost a hundred dollars in 2017 would cost $107.50 today. Wages that the same mural bears the words “We are still in place that takes newborns from their parents.”

At the Sussex ceremony, Donovan Augustine Thunderbird Woman, an Lu’u traditional elder, spoke of her work with residential school survivors.

Lorraine Clair, a Mi’kmaw woman from Elsipogtog who experienced ROMP brutality during her two arrests at the 2013 shale gas protests, spoke about her difficult Knockwood’s book, Out of the Depths: The Experiences of Mi’kmaw Children at the Indian Residential School at Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia, her experience, and the affects on her family.

Clair shared that she grew up in foster homes, and like the children at the Shubenacadie Residential School, she experienced her caretakers scrubbing her skin to make it more supple. She brought her children and sang it at the ceremony, bringing many to tears.

Let the statues and murals come down

Sussex, the mural capital of Atlantic Canada, has two murals that are supposed to tell the Wolastoq creation story, but according to the墨皮斯克y language, their language was stolen from them.

A historian and activist for the restoration of the Wolastoqiyik language, she is clear that her people did not lose their language, their language was stolen from them.

According to O’Byrne, “the Sussex Vale Indian School was designed to strip language and culture away from Indigenous students.”

While children were leaving the school illiterate, the New England Company decided to close the school in 1826. O’Byrne further explains: “Sussex Vale was closed after two boards of inquiry reported on the serious financial irregularities, and other wrongdoing at the school.”

Alma Brooks, a Wolastoqey clan mother, told those gathered at the ceremony that what happened to her family is still a profound injustice.

“Being made to go to a residential school is torture because they were not allowed to speak our language, our culture and our traditions,” said Alma.

She continued on page 1

Support The Brief

Independent journalism by the NB Media Co-op

Join

Become a member of your local media co-op. Memberships are $30/year.

Donate

The NB Media Co-op is supported with donations from individuals, labour unions and social justice groups.

Donate today and help us grow.

Memberships and donations can be paid online at nbmediacoop.org or by sending a cheque made out to the NB Media Co-op at the address below.

Volunteer

Research, write, edit, factcheck stories

Distribute The Brief

Organize special events

Sign up for monthly email alerts.

Email:NB Media Co-op

180 St. John St., Fredericton, NB E3B 4A9

Email: info@nbmediacoop.org; Website: nbmediacoop.org

Donate

Donate

The Peace and Friendship Alliance is one body of Indigenous and non-Indigenous folk from across the Wabanaki region working to protect the lands, waters, people and all creatures and respect the Peace and Friendship treaties.

Later this summer, a new kind of memorial will be installed in Sussex. The Peace and Friendship Alliance will return to Sussex and hold numerous talking circles relating to genocide. This has nothing to do with conversations relating to genocide. This has nothing to do with conversations relating to genocide. This has nothing to do with conversations relating to genocide. This has nothing to do with conversations relating to genocide.