

The Proposed Haskell Institute Historic District

A recent study¹ evaluated the historic significance of Haskell Indian Nations University (HINU) and adjacent Baker University property known as the Baker Wetland. Both properties were formerly part of the Haskell Institute, an early Native American boarding school. The study recommends that the modern HINU campus and Baker Wetland should be determined eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places as a "Historic District" due to their association with the former Haskell Institute.

In the 1870s and 1880s the United States government began an extensive, organized effort to provide education for Indian children. The stated purpose of this program was to acculturate Indians into what was considered mainstream American life. Initially, schools were founded on reservations. Later, off-reservation boarding schools became a significant part of the program. Haskell Institute, founded in Lawrence, Kansas in 1884, was one of the first of these off-reservation boarding schools. The school's initial focus was on elementary grades and vocational training. It evolved over a century into a university, and today is the only all-Indian university in the nation.

Haskell Institute started with a few buildings, which included dormitories, classrooms, barns and shops, and contained large tracts of farmland. Additional buildings and farmland were added to the school through the late 1800s; and by 1902, the school contained approximately 1,000 acres, with the buildings clustered on the uplands in the northern part of campus, and the farmland spreading south to the Wakarusa River. Farming was the primary focus of the school's vocational training for boys. The farm included orchards, cropland, hay fields and pasture for livestock.

Conditions in the early years of the school have been described as harsh for students. Haskell and other off-reservation boarding schools were organized on a military model, and discipline was strict. Living quarters, diet, and health care were described in several early reports as substandard. Students were frequently homesick and many ran away from school. A significant number of students died from communicable diseases such as influenza during the early years of the school. In the early 1900s, life at Haskell and at other Indian boarding schools improved. In part this was due to liberalizing policies of the federal government. Better living conditions were also brought about by improvements in industry, transportation, medicine, and the economic health of the nation. Haskell added higher grade levels to its program through the early 1900s, and dropped the elementary grades.

The national Indian education program was greatly changed in the 1930s, with the advent of Roosevelt's New Deal and "Indian New Deal" programs. Many off-reservation boarding schools were closed. Haskell was kept open through lobbying of tribes, its alumni, and the local community. Academic and vocational training programs were altered, the farm was closed, and the school's agricultural land was leased to local farmers. New buildings were added to the campus over time to replace deteriorating buildings or buildings that had been destroyed by fire, and to accommodate the schools growth. The school's academic program evolved over time. Post-secondary programs were added through the 1950s. The school becoming a junior college in 1970, and ultimately Haskell Indian Nations University (HINU) in 1992. The school is administered by the U. S. Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs and has developed a general university curriculum integrating academic education with a Native American cultural perspective.

¹ Paul E. Brockington, Jr. and Bruce G. Harvey, 2001, Documentation and Recommendations Concerning Determination of Eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places of Haskell Indian Nations University and the Baker Wetlands, Douglas County, Kansas.

The school's agricultural land was leased to local farmers from the 1930s until the 1960s, when the Federal government donated over 500 acres of flood plain land to Baker University. Several small parcels of flood plain land were also donated to the University of Kansas and to the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks. Baker University began a very successful program in the late 1960s, to convert the former flood plain agricultural land to wetlands. Today, Baker Wetland is recognized as a National Natural Landmark. Baker University has established educational programs and research studies in the wetland, and has made the wetland available to Haskell for its research needs.

The modern HINU campus covers about 320 acres, with dormitories, classrooms, administration facilities, and other buildings clustered in the northern portion of the campus. The southern campus area is undeveloped with grassed fields and woodlands. Eleven buildings and the Haskell Cemetery have been determined historically significant by past studies. A review of the campus indicates that many landscape areas within the campus are also historically significant, and that the buildings together with the landscape elements form a "Historic District" eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

Baker Wetland, located south of the modern HINU campus, was formerly part of the Haskell Institute. Its use for agricultural training was an integral part of the early school's vocational program. Careful inspection and consideration of the Baker Wetland indicates that, although there have been many changes to the area to assist its conversion to wetlands, there remains significant structural evidence of the former Haskell Farm. Structural elements still present in the Baker Wetland include dikes, canals, field ditches, tile drains, and roads, all dating from the late 1800s to the early 1900s. In addition, the general condition of Baker Wetland is open land preserves with strong similarities in appearance to the former farm. Since this area was an integral part of the historic Haskell Institute campus and a crucial part of its vocational program, it has been recommended that Baker Wetland be included along with the modern HINU campus in the proposed Haskell Institute Historic District.

The recommendation to list this area on the National Register of Historic Places as a Historic District is based on National Register Criterion A, with a period of significance from 1884 to 1940, and historic themes of Politics/Government, Social History, Education, and Ethnic (Native American) Heritage. Events of great importance took place at Haskell Institute, and programs of national significance in our history are exemplified there. An understanding of the significance of these events, and of the patterns of national importance that they represent is apparent when visiting the property contained within the proposed Historic District.