



**Testimony of
Chief Ben Barnes
The Shawnee Tribe
January 24, 2024**

In support of HB 2208

Chairman Carpenter, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in favor of HB 2208 authorizing the conveyance of the Shawnee Indian Mission Labor School, located in Fairway, KS, to the Shawnee Tribe. My name is Ben Barnes, and I am the Chief of the Shawnee Tribe.

The Shawnee people have existed as distinct people of North America for more than 500 years. Shawnees met the first Europeans in what would become the southeastern United States in 1540. The Shawnee people have maintained our culture, religion, and language for centuries despite numerous and continuous westward migrations and removals.

Our migration west ended when the Shawnee arrived in Kansas. The other two modern federally recognized Shawnee governments, known today as the Eastern Shawnee Tribe and the Absentee Shawnee Tribe bypassed Kansas entirely. My people, the Shawnee Tribe, first began arriving to the area in 1825, following the cessation of land via treaty from the Kaw Nation. Our leaders chose the area of present-day Shawnee, Kansas, as our headquarters. However, at that time, the territory included all lands from the Missouri border to present-day Topeka. In 1854, the US government reduced the Kansas Reservation to 160,000 acres, forcing many Kansas Shawnees to relocate to northeastern Oklahoma.

During the Civil War, Shawnees served with distinction in the Union armies, fighting alongside soldiers from what had become the State of Kansas. The Kansas Shawnees became known as the "Loyal Shawnee" for our service to the abolition of slavery, the United States, and, of course, the State of Kansas. As our fellow Kansans know, a heavy cost was borne by all, including the Shawnee, most notably when William Clarke Quantrill's guerilla band of Confederate sympathizers sacked our villages and butchered our women, children, and elderly.

Following the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and upon returning home from service during the war, Shawnees would find squatters upon their lands. The pressure would encourage Shawnees to migrate yet again, but this time due south to a recently formed Indian Territory that would become today's Oklahoma.

Over the succeeding generations, we Shawnees whose families came from Kansas wore the name “Loyal Shawnee” proudly. During those years, we never lost our identity as a distinct people with a government of our own, a language, culture, and religion. Finally, in December of 2000, after decades of working toward fully restoring our status as a federally recognized tribe with historic treaty status with the United States, an Act of the United States Congress conferred our modern name, which is quite simply the “Shawnee Tribe.”

This name befits our migratory nature and history in more than twenty states. We are proud people whose ancestors ring from the pages of United States history. Persons like Tecumseh, Tenskwatawa, Black Bob, Na-nex-se Blackhoof, and Bluejacket are not just our heroes but our family.

Today, we come before you to respect those ancestors again as we seek your partnership to save a treasure for all Kansans and a sacred site for the Shawnee Tribe. The Shawnee Indian Mission Labor School was established on October 28, 1839, and operated as a boarding school until 1862, just a year after Kansas became a state. The rich history of the site, as well as the architectural significance of its structures, finishes, and interiors, led to the site being declared a National Historic Landmark.

Unfortunately, this cultural treasure is in grave distress. By now, you’ve all seen the report from Architectural Resources Group, a nationally recognized firm specializing in historic structures. Their report does not nitpick:

- Leaking roofs, windows, and walls.
- Weather damage is already present in historically significant interiors.
- Two-thirds of the site is not available to the public.
- The West Building, the oldest residence in Kansas, is not even safe for the public to enter.

These conditions led the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the nation’s leading advocates for cultural preservation, to evaluate this site and deem it worthy of inclusion among its “11 Most Endangered” sites. Out of respect, publication of that designation was withheld after Jenny Chin’s untimely passing. But the import of the National Trust’s finding cannot be understated. Designation as “most endangered” is made only after careful examination by the Trust’s expert preservationists and is typically seen by local preservationists as a means of garnering support and kick-starting fundraising.

I can understand that those charged with caring for this site and its structures would be naturally defensive of their efforts. But the simple truth is that the site is in peril, and I cannot, respectfully, understand how anyone could claim otherwise.

The Shawnee Tribe wants to **SAVE THIS SITE!** It is important to our people, as it is to all Kansans and Americans. We have already expended significant resources to prepare a Historic Structures Report, one of the foundational documents for a preservation effort of this type.

Based upon findings from its inspection, ARG has estimated that it could cost as much as \$15 million to ensure this site remains a public asset for generations to come.

I know it may surprise some of you, but I am not here to ask the State of Kansas for funds to make those repairs; I'm here to offer those funds.

The passage of HB 2208 will empower the Shawnee Tribe to save this site and fund the complete restoration of this landmark without costing the State a single dime. The Shawnee Tribe is committed to investing the total cost of restoring and operating this site for the benefit of the public.

Despite the hurtful speculation about our intentions, I want to be abundantly clear: the Shawnee Tribe WILL NOT seek any other use for this site other than the preservation and interpretation of the Shawnee Indian Manual Labor School. As you know, if the site is conveyed to the Shawnee Tribe, it will remain subject to the local land regulations, zoning, and ordinances of the City of Fairway. Not only will we not seek to re-zone this land, but we will also actively oppose any attempt by others to do so. This school is a landmark, and I hope we can all agree it should stay a landmark.

The passage of HB 2208 would also expand public access and educational opportunities for students.

The Mission holds many stories beyond those of the Native kids who attended there. The Shawnee Indian Mission played an essential role in the formation of Kansas. The oldest residential structure is at the Mission. But with only two of the three structures open, many of those stories are hidden from the public.

Our Cultural Resource and Preservation department is staffed by professional archeologists, historians, and other professionals with a robust historic preservation and curation track record.

Our plan to restore this site includes opening all three buildings and curating new and expanded exhibits that reflect the whole history of this site. This will create ever more opportunities to enrich the experience of families and school field trips alike.

The Shawnee Indian Mission will not be our first historic property in Kansas. Our commitment to preservation, cultural interpretation, and proper stewardship of public resources has been actively played out for years at the site of Prophet's Grave. The Shawnee Tribe, partnering with the State and other stakeholders, actively maintains and preserves that monument, beautifying its surrounding community, respecting the significance of its history, and honoring a sacred site for the Shawnee people.

With the passage of HB 2208, we can do the same here...

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of this needed legislation. I am happy to answer any questions the Committee might have at the appropriate time.