

## William Taylor Shelton and the Navajo Collection at the Museum of North Carolina Handicrafts at the Shelton House

We have tried to do some research about William Shelton, and here's what we've come up with. It is not sophisticated research of a historian, but the online research of a few Friends trying to understand what Shelton's role as an administrator of an Indian Boarding School:

William Taylor Shelton was the second child of Stephen Shelton and Mahala Conley Shelton, born May 7, 1869. He followed his parents' interest in education and, (according to the museum website), in 1892, approximately 23 years-old, Will was appointed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs as a U.S. Government instructor in agriculture at the Cherokee School in Yellow Hill, North Carolina (now the town of Cherokee). Working his way up through the Bureau, ultimately he became superintendent of the San Juan Indian Agency and principal of the San Juan Indian School on the Navajo reservation at Shiprock, NM. His wife Hattie Pitts Shelton, also a Waynesville native, worked alongside him as his assistant and stenographer.

According to staff at the museum, the collection of Navajo artworks and artifacts collected by the Sheltons during their tenure with the BIA is considered a highly significant record of the evolution of Navajo artworks during this period.

Friends have concerns over the long-term cultural effect of the policies of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the system of boarding schools maintained by the bureau. We might also express concern over the obvious "European" influence evident in the collection and the way these "gifts" to the Sheltons were obtained. Requests for further information to both the museum and to the Navajo website referenced below received no response.

According to the Lapahie website, referenced at: [http://www.lapahie.com/Shiprock\\_town.cfm](http://www.lapahie.com/Shiprock_town.cfm) Shiprock was originally named Naat'áanii Nééz (Tall Chief) after Superintendent William T. Shelton, who founded Shiprock as a government settlement for the San Juan School and Agency in 1903.

On September 11, 1903, Mr. Shelton opened Shiprock Indian Boarding School and administrative agency for the northern Navajos with a staff of three Anglo-Americans and three Navajo employees. The settlement was originally laid out on land belonging to a Navajo named Tséheya Begay.

According to one of Shelton's reports in the early 1900s, Indians had been irrigating here for many years, and there were 275 Navajo farms under some 25 ditches drawing water between Shiprock and Farmington. Shelton immediately pushed for an agricultural program, improved and extended the irrigation system, developed a fine dairy herd, initiated the Shiprock Fair (the first and largest Navajo Fair on the Navajo Nation), built a sawmill near Sanostee, and opened a coal mine in the Shiprock Hogback area. Stern disciplinarian and ruthless in his prosecution of moral lapses, he was respected throughout the region for his staunch championship of the Navajos and for his efforts in adding the Utah-Colorado Navajo Reservation extension to the main Navajo Reservation.

The first buildings in Shiprock were constructed of log and adobe. Brick largely replaced these after the disastrous flood of 1912. Shiprock Indian Boarding School would remain until the boarding system was phased out in the early 1980s.

## Background History for the Shelton House Field Trip

William Shelton was superintendent of the San Juan Indian Agency in the late 1800 and early 1900. We have no real information about the role that he played there except for the quote from his report but it is important to place him in the context of history. Below are several quotes from that time along with links to more detailed descriptions.

It is important to acknowledge the devastating role that the US played in the lives of the Native peoples. These attitudes and policy impact our society today.

### **The Federal Government:**

"During the late 1870's, federal policymakers set two goals for their Indian wards: continued reduction of Native land holdings and the Americanization of "savage" reservation residents in preparation for integration into mainstream society... "We are fifty millions of people, and they [Indians] are only one-fourth of one million," reported Commissioner of Indian Affairs Hiram Price in 1881. "The few must yield to the many."

[http://www.rbhayes.org/hayes/content/files/hayes\\_historical\\_journal/usindianpolicyhhj.htm](http://www.rbhayes.org/hayes/content/files/hayes_historical_journal/usindianpolicyhhj.htm)

### **"Shoshoni Chief Washakie doubtless spoke for many Natives when he remarked in 1878:**

"The white man's government promised that if we, the Shoshones, would be content with the little patch allowed us, [it] would keep us well supplied with everything necessary to comfortable living, and would see that no white man should cross our borders for our game, or for anything that is ours. *But it has not kept its word!* The white man kills our game, captures our furs, and sometimes feeds his herds upon our meadows. And your great and mighty government...does not protect us in our rights. It leaves us with-out the promised seed, without tools for cultivating the land, without implements for harvesting our crops, without breeding animals better than ours, without the food we still lack....I say again, *the government does not keep its word!* And so after all we can get by cultivating the land, and by hunting and fishing, we are sometimes nearly starved, and go half naked, as you see us! Knowing all this, do you wonder, sir, that we have fits of desperation and think to be avenged?\*" [http://www.rbhayes.org/hayes/content/files/hayes\\_historical\\_journal/usindianpolicyhhj.htm](http://www.rbhayes.org/hayes/content/files/hayes_historical_journal/usindianpolicyhhj.htm)

### **And further information about the Boarding Schools.**

"The goal of Indian education from the 1880s through the 1920s was to assimilate Indian people into the melting pot of America by placing them in institutions where traditional ways could be replaced by those sanctioned by the government. Federal Indian policy called for the removal of children from their families and in many cases enrollment in a government run boarding school. In this way, the policy makers believed, young people would be immersed in the values and practical knowledge of the dominant American society while also being kept away from any influences imparted by their traditionally-minded relatives." <https://content.lib.washington.edu/aipnw/marr.html>

\*Footnotes in this document can be found on the websites referenced.

If Friends would like a chance to debrief after this visit arrangements can be made among the group to meet over dinner.