

Ohio State University Inspire Podcast

Grappling with the Land Grant truth

Ohio State Professor Steven Gavazzi learned a painful truth about Land Grant Universities — just after his book on the subject went to press. Now he's working with a team of Ohio State faculty to find a path to healing harm done to indigenous tribes when they lost lands to fund the university through the Morrill Act of 1862.

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Robin Chenoweth: Imagine Steve Gavazzi's surprise. The Education and Human Ecology professor's second book about Land Grant Universities — the great social experiment by Justin Morrill and Abraham Lincoln to kick-start higher education for the middle class — was just going to press.

Steve Gavazzi: When we were handing in the manuscript for that publication in March of 2020, it was the exact time that the Land Grab Universities report was published by High Country News.

Robin Chenoweth: The report — by an independent nonprofit magazine — was earth-shattering. Across the country and almost overnight, the Morrill Act of 1862, which launched not only Ohio State but 51 other universities, took a reputational hit. The world discovered that the money used to found Land Grant Universities came at a tremendous cost — from the sale of nearly 11 million acres of Indigenous land — seized, devalued or coerced from about 250 tribal communities. It's not just that the campuses sit upon land that once occupied by indigenous people. No, this was a far greater revelation.

Steve Gavazzi: Even though I had written one book and edited another book on land grant universities, I obviously did not understand that the land that was given to land grant universities came directly from tribal nations across the country. And in fact, for Ohio State, it was a total of 108 different tribes and bands across the continental United States whose land had been taken and sold, and then given to the state of Ohio to found what then became The Ohio State University.

Robin Chenoweth: The seed-fund for Ohio State alone came from the sale of more than 600,000 acres of land — hundreds or even thousands of miles from Columbus, Ohio — from Michigan to California, land that was dispossessed from American Indians and sold to create an endowment for Ohio State. And the university wasn't alone. University of Maryland, Cornell, Auburn, Virginia Tech, Purdue. Fifty-two Land Grant Universities benefited from the sale of stolen land. A shocked Steve Gavazzi decided it was high time to get busy understanding the full truth of the Morrill Act and how it funded Land Grant Universities. This is the Ohio State University Inspire Podcast. I'm Robin Chenoweth. Carol Delgrosso is our audio engineer; Kyle Bucklew is our student intern. You might have seen email signatures or websites that proclaim that the university sits on land once occupied by native peoples. Those are pretty common across higher education. So are land acknowledgments on university websites. But what the High Country News report discovered about the Morrill Act of 1862 was different. Tristan Ahtone was the reporter who worked with University of Cambridge lecturer Robert Lee to synthesize a

massive data set — quantifying all the parcels of land taken from tribes — whether forcibly, by treaties ratified or not, for no compensation or for just a fraction of their worth.

Tristan Ahtone: It was really Robert's work, Dr. Lee's work, that prompted all of this. He had been working and doing research in this area for quite a while before we connected. I thought what he was doing was really great example of investigative data driven reporting. So we kind of just went from there.

Robin Chenoweth: Ahtone and Lee wrote an article but also worked with a cartographer who created an immense interactive map using the data Lee had assembled.

Tristan Athone: It's the magic of spreadsheets, and those are huge, huge spreadsheets, obviously, 80,000 lines of data, like however many columns are with it. It's a massive undertaking that he really pioneered.

Robin Chenoweth: On the website, you type in any land grant university, MIT, Penn State. We'll do Ohio State. A spray of arcs spread out from Columbus, Ohio to other parts of the map. Click at the end of an arc, and you see a land parcel: A corn field in Adams, Nebraska, where in 1825 the Kansas Tribe was paid 93 cents an acre for land. In Nebraska, where the U.S. paid \$298 to the tribal nation, The Ohio State University received \$28,462, a 9,500% return. Or there's scenic highway snaking through 39 acres in Mendocino, California, which were seized in an unratified treaty from four tribes in 1851. No compensation. But proceeds from that sale went to Ohio State. A high school in White Cloud, Michigan, sitting on land ceded by the Chippewa and Ottawa nations in 1836. The sale ultimately benefited Ohio State, but was also part of a colossal dispossession of more than half million acres in the upper and lower peninsulas that funded 15 universities. White Cloud High School's mascot, by the way, is an American Indian. Even Ahtone, from the Kiowa tribe, was blown away by the scope of what he saw.

Tristan Ahtone: I'm generally pretty aware of dispossession of native lands on a general sort of U.S. foundational story basis. Yes. But in terms of the actual, like, nitty gritty that came out of this story, no, I was as floored, I think, as most readers were after reading this, when engaging with Dr. Lee's research. To see how a piece of legislation like the Morrill Act is actually functioning is very, very different than sort of just a vague notion of this happening. There's been some theoretical discussion or talk about the Morrill Act as like settler legislation. But actually turning it into something that was data driven, I think is very different.

Robin Chenoweth: Ahtone is not familiar with specifics of the Ohio State parcels, but got to explore dispossessed land parcels in the Tucson area with photographer Kalen Goodluck.

Tristan Ahtone: They're big, it's not just the size of a house in a yard kind of thing. I mean, it's really like you have to drive around. It's actually really large parcels of land. But it's really fascinating to drive through there and find stuff.

Robin Chenoweth: One of the photos Goodluck captured in Arizona? The Apache Tears Motel — situated on confiscated Apache land as identified by the report and used to help fund the University of Arizona. Back in Ohio, Steve Gavazzi, who studies campus community relationships, had just finished a book about Land Grant Universities that he now knew only told a piece of the story. Rather than just licking his wounds, he got busy. He began reaching out to campus partners, Brian Snyder of the Discovery Theme's InFACT, who looped in Casey Hoy from Food, Agriculture and Environmental Sciences, and Mike Roberts of the First Nations

Development Institute, the largest indigenous-led development institute in the country. Snyder introduced Gavazzi to John Low.

John Low: I'm an associate professor at The Ohio State University in Newark. I'm a citizen of the Pokagon band of Potawatomi Indians, grew up in that community. I am director of the Newark Earthworks Center at the Newark Campus of Ohio State University.

Robin Chenoweth: Low, in fact, is one of a handful of American Indian professors at Ohio State. And by the way, he prefers the term American Indian, and to a lesser degree, indigenous peoples, to being called Native American.

Steve Gavazzi: We together began to brainstorm the various different ways that we were going to be able to approach tribal leaders across the country, both about their knowledge of what had happened to land that was directly connected to their tribes, as well as trying to start a conversation about what kind of reparative activities we might be able to undertake to make better the kinds of injustices that had happened well over 150 years ago now.

Robin Chenoweth: The group applied for a \$49,000 Seed Fund for Racial Justice, a program developed at the request of the Office of the President. And they got the grant. Steve Gavazzi.

Steve Gavazzi: Since that time, we've had three additional grants, all that were internal to Ohio State in order to expand on this original project.

Robin Chenoweth: So Ohio State's behind what you're doing?

Steve Gavazzi: To the tune of a quarter million dollars so far.

Jacquelyn Meshelemiah: The reviewers looked at Dr. Gavazzi's team's proposal. And it made sense.

Robin Chenoweth: Jacquelyn Meshelemiah is associate vice provost for Ohio State's Office of Diversity and Inclusion, which collaborates in overseeing the Seed Fund for Racial Justice.

Jacquelyn Meshelemiah: We are a land grant institution. We serve the people in the state of Ohio and the people of this nation and the people around this country based on our alums. It makes sense that The Ohio State University would be a trailblazer, would be a leader in looking at Land Grant institutions and acknowledging the history of land grant institutions. And we cannot do that without acknowledging the wrongs that has been done to Native Americans in this country and in the state as well.

Steve Gavazzi: Grappling with the history of the land grant system is going to be relatively new for many people. Because again, I think until the Land Grab University report came out in March of 2020, not a whole lot of people really understood what was going on. We wanted to make sure that in this project, we were able to help the university to understand what the perspectives of the tribal leaders were at this point in time. One of the things that we're finding out is that many of these tribes actually don't know, did not know, that their land had been a contribution to the Ohio State University, as well as in many tribes' cases, several different land grant universities. So there's an educational piece to this that we've been doing, again, in partnership with First Nations Development Institute. And we also are accumulating information that we are going to be providing in the way of a report that will document what these tribal leaders think should be done.

Robin Chenoweth: John Low

John Low: We can talk amongst ourselves in Columbus about recompense for Native peoples. And that's oftentimes in the past been the historical cases, that the non-native people sit around the table and gnash their teeth and chew on their fingernails and wonder, 'Oh, what should we do to calm our guilty consciences?' Rather than doing that, Steve and Brian and Casey and Mike and Rick and Marty, the group have really had the foresight to, 'Hey, let's ask the Indians. Let's ask the contemporary tribal governments, of the tribes that either were displaced, or the tribes that funded the university, the endowment tribes, let's ask them what their ideas are about commitment or responsibility. What would they like to see The Ohio State University do?' That's been the exciting part of the intersections of these four grants that Steve mentioned, is that they are working in tandem with each other towards a common goal of creating a much more vibrant, vital, robust programming and commitment by the university towards native peoples generally. What are the responsibilities and the commitments and the obligations for Ohio State, given the fact that it's sitting on land taken from others, and given that its origins are based upon endowments from the sale of land of native peoples that was taken?

Robin Chenoweth: Let's be honest. Many Ohioans have a disconnect when it comes to needs and concerns of native peoples. And there's a good reason for that. Only 0.16 percent — fewer than 50 Ohio State students — are American Indian.

John Low: It's the non-native students that I get, the hundreds, the thousands now, that I've had, that have never met an Indian before. I get so excited every time a class starts, because it's their chance to meet an Indian, that doesn't look like a stereotype and that has a lot of information that they need to know and to really understand the full breadth of American history. And this isn't just Indian history, this is American history. Now, this is a part of what's going on with them too.

Robin Chenoweth: But the fact is, most Ohioans are unmindful of that larger history, which began thousands of years before Europeans stepped onto territory that we now call the United States. Most people couldn't begin to name the five tribes once associated with Ohio. Can you? If not, listen up, because we met John Low for a history lesson at a place where the indigenous narrative is so sacred, and so enduring that it's built into the landscape, an ancient treasure that might be soon be recognized as being on par with the Pyramids, Machu Picchu and Easter Island. It's just down the road from the Newark Campus where Low teaches.

John Low: We're at the Great Circle of the Newark Earthworks in Newark, Ohio.

Robin Chenoweth: This is just an absolutely beautiful place.

John Low: The Newark Earthworks, which primarily the Great Circle, and the Octagon survive, were built by Hopewell era peoples, probably about 2,000 years ago. So the great circle is a very large, earthen work in the shape of a circle. It's mounds of earth, configured in that geometric shape. There's a door that we entered into from the east, which would be certainly traditional for Indian peoples today and apparently was traditional for a native peoples back then, too. And the Great Circle, we don't know what the purpose is, but we can speculate. We can speculate. But it's a very large space. To give you an idea. In the 1800s, the Grand Army of the Republic, the Civil War Union soldiers' veterans' group, met here. Seven thousand people were inside this great circle. We know that people traveled from long distances to come here; that this was a place of pilgrimage. And we know that from the things we find here we find flint

from that only comes from Yellowstone, we find copper that only comes from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan here, we find shells that are distinct to the Gulf of Mexico. It was a place of importance.

Robin Chenoweth: So you say they're not Hopewell Indians, they're people from the Hopewell era. What happened to those people?

John Low: The peoples that were involved with these Hopewell era structures all across Ohio, seem to have lasted in this kind of life way, this kind of ceremonial space, for about 500 years. And then they moved into something else. There was no great die off, there was no calamity, there was no great conflict. So my best guess is that their descendants continued to live here. And their descendants continue to live here in North America, up till the present time. And, so, we can talk about historical tribes — the Shawnee, the Wyandot, the Miami, Odawa, Potawatomi, all of those peoples and many others, there's over 40 tribes, historically connected to Ohio — probably all of those peoples are descendants of the Mound Builders. And I can speak from personal experience that as a child, I learned when entering a sweat lodge, that we have four circles within that sweat lodge, that are around the *shkote*, the fire. And those four circles are to acknowledge that we are descended from the mound builders that we're descended from the mammoth people, and the mound building people and the historical people and the contemporary people. That's what those circles represent. So I learned that from my elders; didn't have to get a PhD, to be able to tell me that.

Robin Chenoweth: So there's a strong oral tradition.

John Low: Very strong oral tradition that was passed down, despite the fact that, of course, we had a 90 to 95% die-off rate after European invasion of North America, post 1500. You know, so much death, from disease, sometimes from conflict, sometimes from displacement, starvation, but primarily from disease, influenza, smallpox, typhoid, those types of things that native peoples had no immunity to, foreign diseases. So, we lost a lot of the knowledge. And, so, when people say, 'Well, why don't you know specifically who built these mounds?' It's because we lost so much.

Robin Chenoweth: And that applies to the native peoples here in Ohio as well.

John Low: Sure. We lost oral history through that great die off, a lot of that oral history anyway. And so we're relegated to the historians that non-natives wrote. that Europeans and white Americans wrote. And they didn't really get to Ohio until the, 1700s while the diseases got here a lot sooner than that. And some people weren't just dying, they were fleeing, right? As an example, we know that Tecumseh's mother, Shawnee, from near Chillicothe, she headed west. She left her children, Shawnee Prophet Tenskwatawa and Tecumseh behind with a relative and she fled west. Lots of people fled the unknown understood diseases that were wiping out entire villages. So there are no federally recognized tribes in Ohio. My tribe in Southwest Michigan/Northwest Indiana, the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi, are the closest tribe to Newark, Ohio that are federally recognized. Which is an indication of not that there weren't a lot of Indian people here. There were a lot of Indian people here. To the contrary, this is an epicenter of Indian population. What it is indicative of is the efficiency of Indian removal.

Robin Chenoweth: The efficiency of Indian removal. The displacement of Indians from lands that now mark the campuses of Ohio State officially began even before Ohio became a state, with the 1795 Treaty of Greenville. The treaty lines didn't last, though, because the Indian

Removal Act of 1830 shunted those same tribes west. And by the 1840s, American Indians were essentially gone from Ohio.

John Low: It was a very dark time. You know, they talked about the two original Sins of the United States being free labor and free land. Free labor is slavery. Free land is the Indian land that was taken. Native peoples were not expected to be here in Ohio anymore. We weren't wanted here. We had served our purpose. And it was time for manifest destiny to march on and clear the way for Western civilization.

Robin Chenoweth: But the lands to the west to where Ohio tribes had been removed were also being removed from them by coercion, force or purchase at rock bottom prices. The U.S. government had become the great landlord, so that by 1862 and the Morrill Act, there was massive capital to fund a great idea that nevertheless hid a very painful truth. And so, Steve Gavazzi and his team are taking that truth to the tribes affected by the dispossession of land to fund Ohio State. The pandemic posed challenges. Tribal nations already strapped for resources are disproportionately affected by COVID-19.

Steve Gavazzi: To date, we have talked to just under 10 tribes, and that's with six months' worth of work. We also though have reached out to the 35 different tribal colleges and universities that support the higher education of tribal nations across the country. And so, we've actually talked with over 10 of those tribal college and university leaders. We don't know yet what the full group would say. We hope that over the course of the next six months of this project, we'll get a much better understanding of what the remainder of those tribes think. But we do have some clues. First and foremost, there's a very strong emphasis on opening the university to the sons and daughters, and grandsons and granddaughters of those tribes whose land was taken and sold to support the Ohio State University. There are many states across the country, Ohio unfortunately is not one of them, that currently provides tuition breaks, scholarships, sometimes full rides, for members of historically located tribes. That has been fairly uniform across the people that we have talked to. There should be some special significance to the Native American students who wish to come to the Ohio State University.

John Low: I think part of the reticence or reluctance for tribal peoples to respond to our interview so far is, I think we have to take a long-term view of this. There's a natural suspicion of outside bodies of authority — for good reason — by tribes. There's a natural suspicion of institutions of education, because of our boarding school experience that was meant to oppress and suppress and destroy us. There is a natural suspicion of anybody that comes and says, we're going to do something for you. You know the old adage of 'I'm from the federal government, and I'm here to help you' usually means that they're not. And same thing for institutions like, unfortunately, Ohio State, is that there's a suspicion. And as a community, most tribes have an ethos where things are done based upon community consensus. And so this needs to be talked about amongst the community. And people need to share ideas and wrap their minds around this. And hopefully we'll create a program where these are living processes. And where the commitments are never ending and evolving, because the land is always here. The commitment should always be here.

Robin Chenoweth: Gavazzi and Low still believe in the mission of the Morrill Act, to provide higher education to those who once couldn't access it. Every student on Ohio State may not know what the Morrill Act is, but they certainly can point to Morrill Tower, or they know someone who might be a Morrill Scholar. How do we deal with those sorts of messages because the Morrill Act, displaced a lot of people, and it hurt a lot of people, but yet we've sort of held it up as something to be revered?

Steve Gavazzi: I think this is a both, and. This is not an either, or. I think that people can be what I call Land Grant fierce. And that simply means that you're very proud of the fact that we exist at a university that I think oftentimes holds itself up to a higher level of regard in terms of purpose, perhaps over prestige, and yet, at the same time, recognize the truth of the Land Grant's founding. And I think both can be done. The land grant universities in general and Ohio State University in particular have done tremendous things. And at the same time, there was a tremendous transfer of wealth that went from these tribal nations to the Ohio State University that must be recognized. And again, I think both can happen.

Robin Chenoweth: Back at the Great Circle, cars whiz and sputter on nearby Highway 79, a counterpoint to the 2,000-year-old architectural wonder, that along with six other sites have been nominated to become a UNESCO World Heritage site. They are the largest set of geometric earthen enclosures in the world.

John Low: It's created out of the most sacred materials that we could have used. We could have made it out of granite, or we could have made it out of limestone. We chose to make it out of earth because there's nothing more sacred than the earth.

Robin Chenoweth: But its sister octagon, a mile to the north and also part of the nomination, has a golf course on it, leased from land the state owns. The state is trying to revoke the lease.

John Low: A private golf course on public land, which in and of itself is an oxymoron, right? And so UNESCO officials have made it clear that they would not be willing to include the octagon in any designation of World Heritage status, if the golf course remains. Which makes sense. If there was a golf course on the Acropolis that would taint it, wouldn't it? World Heritage designation is deemed by the state of Ohio as being in the public good. And so they filed suit, and the case is now pending a decision by the state Supreme Court.

Robin Chenoweth: It seems to me there's sort of a correlation here, between what's going on now right here, and what happened when land was taken forcibly from tribes.

John Low: That's a very good point. This is coming forth at a time... I think there's a sense in the nation that there's a bit of reckoning. There's a need for reconciliation. There's a need for addressing the past. Change is in the air. And people are willing to not just subscribe to the myths that their teachers taught them, that they want to find out what really happened for themselves.

Robin Chenoweth: As he talked about the Mound Builders, passing down oral traditions, a hawk landed behind Low, very close by.

John Low: But it, it must have been somebody because these were egalitarian somebody, you know, either a person or persons, women and or men had to be very charismatic and persuasive. Oh, wow.

John Low: That's a really good sign.

Robin Chenoweth: I think it's a good sign.

John Low: It's absolutely good a good sign.

Robin Chenoweth: Just then the hawk flew to the low branches of a tree, revealing its red tail feathers.

John Low: Red-tail hawk is our national seal for the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi. And it reflects the fact that hawks, like eagles, are descendants of Thunderbirds who carry our messages from us, from our hearts and our minds up to the Creator.

Robin Chenoweth: Sitting in the circle, it felt like a good omen. Maybe the Thunderbird is saying, they're ready. At long last, they are working together to set right the past.

Join Steve Gavazzi and John Low on Oct. 6 at noon as they host Tristan Ahtone and Robert Lee, authors of the Land Grab Universities Report, for an online speaker series: Land-Grab Universities: Owning the truth and sharing the path to make amends. See the link in our podcast description.

<https://osu.zoom.us/meeting/register/tJcqd-qqjstHNEA16AcxG6Ts3r0a6J2gTIN>

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