

# Mind the Gaps: BIA, NARA, AIRR, and the Issue of Archival Continuity

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## HISTORY

The United States federal government and the original inhabitants of North America, now known collectively as Native Americans, have had a rocky relationship at best. With the 1830 Indian Removal Act, Andrew Jackson worked tirelessly to remove Native people from their lands and kill them en masse as needed. The following year, Supreme Court Chief Justice, John Marshall, in attempting to define their status, “declared that Indian tribes were ‘domestic dependent nations’ whose ‘relation to the United States resembles that of a ward to his guardian.’” In doing so, Marshall identified them as unique in that “they are both separate nations and part of the United States.”

This distinction created a difficult situation for everyone involved; the United States government sought to eradicate this group of people, but at the same time was charged with the care and responsibility of them. As such, distrust, resentment, and suspicion have always simmered within this relationship.

## ISSUE

Beginning in 1996, the case *Cobell v. Norton* (now referred to as *Cobell v. Salazar*) came before the courts. *Cobell* “is a class action lawsuit alleging federal government mismanagement of accounts held in trust for individual Indians.” Through successful litigation, Elouise Cobell’s (the initiating plaintiff) attorneys finally settled the case in 2010, after showing that the federal government had failed in their responsibilities in five primary ways and therefore breached their duties as record holders, accountants, and trust managers.

Due to the far reaching nature of this litigation, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) at Seattle was affected by the decisions in this case. One of the results of this litigation was that some records from the Pacific Northwest section of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) were removed from the Seattle Federal Records center, as well as from local BIA offices, and placed in the care of the American Indian Records Repository (AIRR). This led to the information problem at hand. In order to serve their record-seeking patrons, NARA at Seattle needs to know the origin and location of these documents.



Andrew Jackson

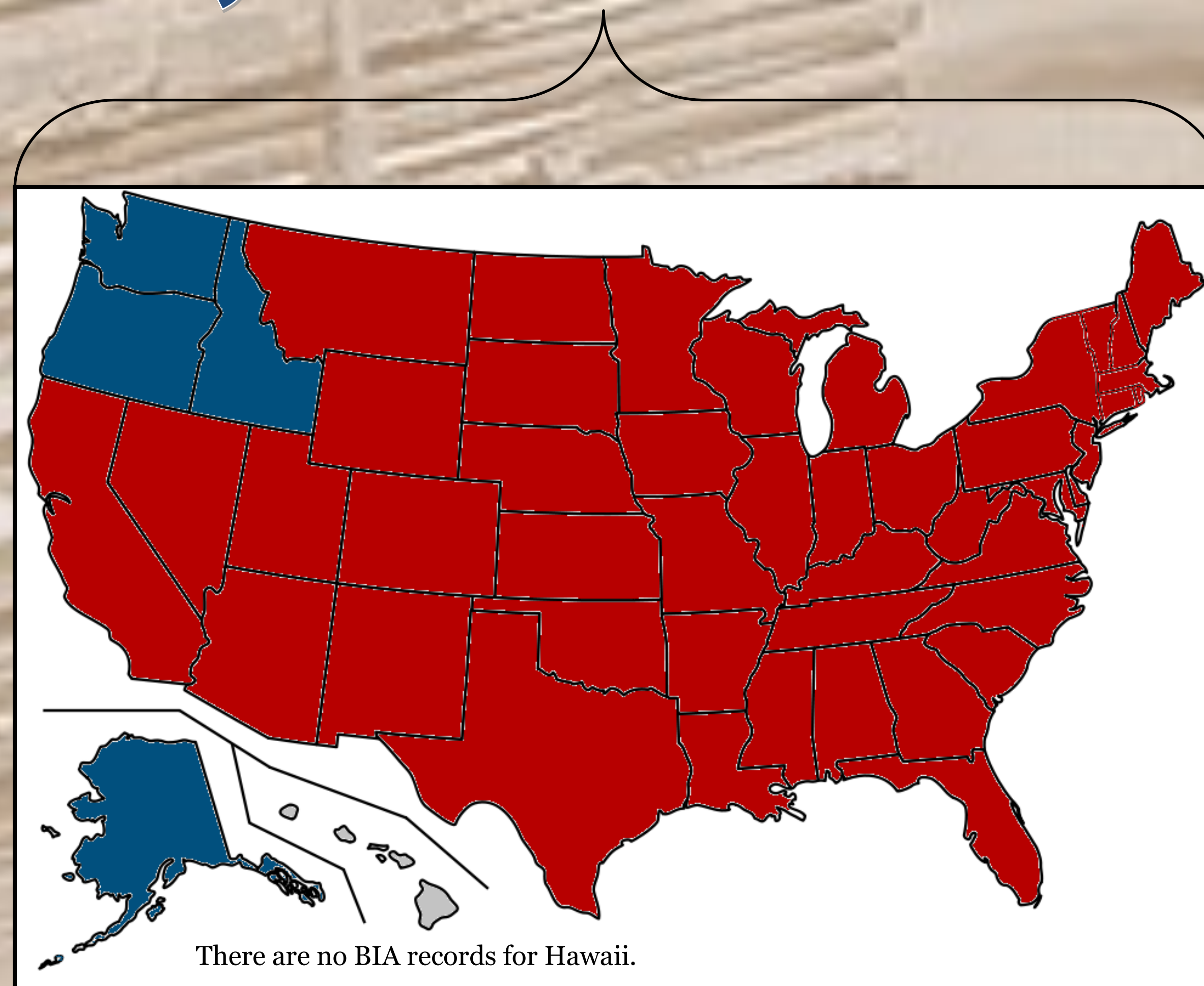


Elouise Cobell

# 40,613 Records

## PROCESS

Several steps were involved in solving this information problem. First, I sorted and analyzed forty thousand plus records in an Excel file, a file not discovered until my project was initiated, to tease out the records related to the Pacific Northwest section and the states within the project scope (Alaska, Washington, Idaho, and Oregon). I then worked to determine what records of value had been moved from NARA and local BIA offices to AIRR. Because AIRR will not respond to information seekers directly, it was important to know which BIA office should handle the information request. My final step was to create a finding aid that includes the most current and correct BIA office name and address in charge of the files, broken down by region and type of record so that those seeking their educational, financial, and personal documents will know to which agency office their request must be submitted.



## NUMBER OF RECORDS PER PROJECT STATE

Washington — 1,913

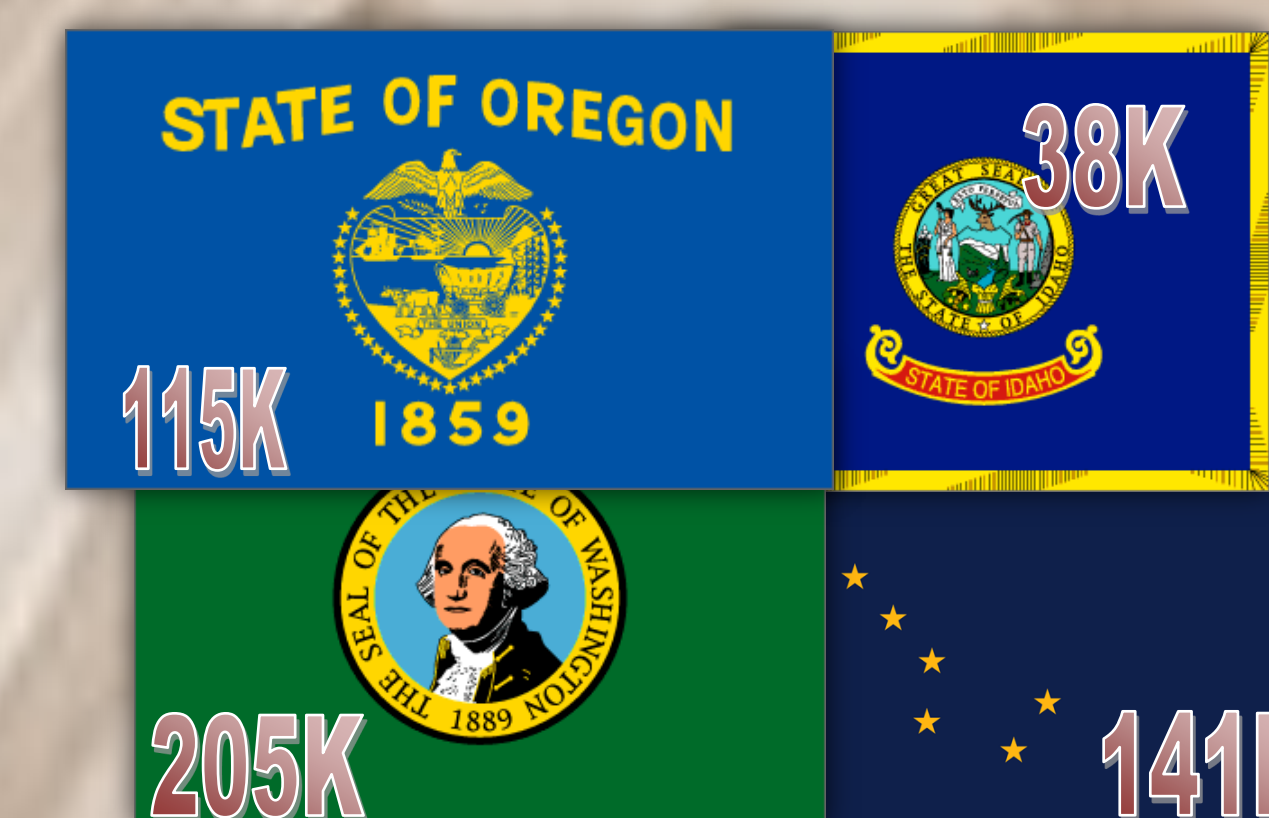
Oregon — 3,515

Alaska — 2,360

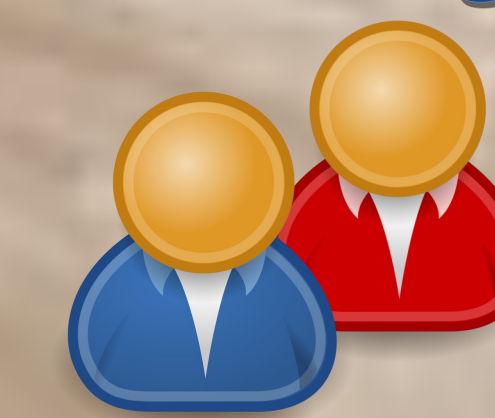
Idaho — 495

## IMPACT

There are potentially more than 0.75M people who may benefit from the finding aid created for this project. Not only those seeking their personal records, as can be seen represented below by the number of people with Native Americans ancestry in each state, but also those interested in genealogical research. Other groups include academic researchers (historians, anthropologists, educators, and sociologists) who cannot be quantified.



Approx. Number of  
People Interested  
in Genealogy



68,499 - Canada  
158,600 - USA

Approx. Number of  
Native Americans  
in Each State

• Alaska State Flag. *50states.com*. 2016. Available at: <http://www.50states.com/flag/akflag.htm>. Accessed May 11, 2016.  
 • American Indian and Alaska Native alone, percent, July 1, 2014, (V2014) (a). *Census.gov*. 2016. Available at: <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/RHI325214/00>. Accessed May 11, 2016.  
 • Andrew Jackson. *Nndb.com*. 2016. Available at: <http://www.nndb.com/people/654/000026576/>. Accessed May 11, 2016.  
 • Boxer, A. (2009, September). Native Americans and the Federal Government. Retrieved February 14, 2016, from <http://www.historytoday.com/andrew-boxer/native-americans-and-federal-government>  
 • Cobell v. Salazar. (n.d.). Retrieved February 14, 2016, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cobell\\_v.\\_Salazar](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cobell_v._Salazar)  
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 • Idaho State Flag. *50states.com*. 2016. Available at: <http://www.50states.com/flag/idflag.htm>. Accessed May 11, 2016.  
 • In Memory of Elouise Cobell. *the sad red earth - how we lived on it*. 2011. Available at: <http://sadreearth.com/in-memory-of-elouise-cobell/>. Accessed May 11, 2016.  
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 • Murphy, M. (2008) Indian Trust Fund Litigation: Legislation to Resolve Accounting Claims in Cobell v. Norton. (CRS Report for Congress, Rep. No. 4291).  
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 • Washington State Flag. *50states.com*. 2016. Available at: <http://www.50states.com/flag/waflag.htm>. Accessed May 11, 2016.