Dakota Resources:

The John R. Brennan Family Papers at the South Dakota Historical Resource Center

JOHN C. BORST

On 23 February 1876, four disheartened prospectors huddled around a campfire in the Black Hills and "decided that perhaps they would do better at founding a town than they had done at finding gold. So, two days later, Sam Scott, John R. Brennan, John W. Allen and James Carney began to lay out Rapid City, on the shores of Rapid Creek, at the mouth of Rapid Canyon." In this manner, John R. Brennan began an association with Rapid City and western South Dakota that would continue until his death in 1919.

John Richard Brennan was born on 22 May 1848 in Kilkenny, Ireland. In 1851, his family left Ireland and settled in Wisconsin, where young Brennan received his education in the public schools. In 1864, he tried to enlist in the 28th Wisconsin Infantry but was rejected because he was underage and did not have parental consent. The following year, Brennan left home for Chica-

^{1.} Untitled Manuscript, Folder 23, John R. Brennan Family Papers, South Dakota Historical Resource Center, Pierre.

go, where he began a career in the hotel business by entering the employ of the Adams House Hotel. In 1869, after holding hotel jobs in Chicago, Milwaukee, Saint Louis, and Cairo, Illinois, Brennan became manager of the Pacific House in Kansas City, Missouri. He stayed in Kansas City until 1871, when he began working for the American House in Denver, Colorado. He left Denver in the fall of 1875 and headed for the Black Hills of Dakota Territory to prospect for gold. He became one of the original incorporators of the Palmer Gulch Mining District.

After helping to found Rapid City in 1876, Brennan served the growing town in a variety of ways. In 1877, he became its first postmaster, a position he held for nine years while he also worked



Main street, Rapid City, South Dakota, 1900—from the photograph collection in the Brennan Family Papers

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John R. Brennan, 1903

as stage express and Union Pacific agent. He served as city alderman and, after Rapid City's incorporation, was elected president of the first city council. He also served for several years as the head of the Rapid City Fire Department. Perhaps his most enduring contribution to the future of Rapid City was his work in helping to lay out the trails and roads that ran into the town. His efforts helped make Rapid City a major center for travel and trade in the Black Hills.

Brennan also made contributions in the business and education fields, serving as an official of the First National Bank in Rapid City and building two hotels—the American House Hotel in 1878 and the Harney House Hotel in 1886. He became Pennington County's first superintendent of schools and served on the Board of Trustees of the Dakota School of Mines. He also spent four years as South Dakota state railway commissioner. During this

time period as well, he married Ada Jane Leedy on 22 December 1880. The Brennans had three children, Paul, Ruth, and a son who died in infancy.

On 1 November 1901, Brennan was appointed United States Indian agent, superintendent, and disbursing agent for the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. Material in his papers indicates that Brennan's administration was competent and fair. He attempted to strike a middle ground in his handling of affairs at Pine Ridge by implementing official policies dictated from Washington but allowing the Sioux to retain old ways and practices wherever possible. His last years at Pine Ridge were troubled by a recurring illness that forced him to make an extended trip to a sanitarium in Battle Creek, Michigan, late in 1915.

After two years of pressure to resign, Brennan left his post at Pine Ridge on 1 July 1917. A move to oust Brennan had begun in July 1915 with an inspection of the agency. A number of letters in Brennan's papers discuss the inspection and the possibility that the pressure to resign was politically engendered. In any event, the report of the inspectors was followed by a letter to Brennan from Indian Commissioner Cato Sells, dated 24 September 1915, informing Brennan that a change was necessary at Pine Ridge. Finding a man to replace Brennan, however, was a problem, and, although he resigned in July 1916, Brennan remained at Pine Ridge for another year until his replacement, Special Agent C. L. Ellis, arrived.

After leaving Pine Ridge, Brennan returned to Rapid City and devoted his time and attention to his various business enterprises. Still troubled by the illness that had bothered him at Pine Ridge, Brennan was forced to return to Battle Creek, Michigan, for additional treatment in October 1919. He died there on 2 November 1919 after a second operation for stomach problems. He was buried in Mountain View Cemetery in Rapid City. His contributions to Rapid City were acknowledged when the Board of Commissioners declared that all city offices and places of business were to be closed during Brennan's funeral.

The John R. Brennan Family Papers at the South Dakota Historical Resource Center in Pierre consist largely of Brennan's papers, although several letters written by family members and a scrapbook kept by a relative of Brennan's wife are also included. The collection is divided into three time-period groupings: pre-Pine Ridge, Pine Ridge, and post-Pine Ridge and miscellaneous. The pre-Pine Ridge grouping consists of general correspondence and business and financial records. The records include bank

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statements, canceled checks, records of the Harney House Hotel, and correspondence with the First National Bank of Rapid City.

The papers that date to Brennan's tenure on the Pine Ridge reservation comprise approximately ninety percent of the collection. Correspondence and scrapbooks make up the biggest portion of these materials. The correspondence is a mixture of personal and official letters that primarily concern affairs at Pine Ridge. The scrapbooks contain items on a wide variety of topics relating to the reservation. This section also contains three volumes of photographs and a number of loose photographs of Indian life on the reservation. A number of bound documents deal with Indian pony claims, 1907 reports by Indian agents, and the 1903 skirmish between Pine Ridge Sioux and a Wyoming sheriff's posse. The Pine Ridge grouping also contains material relating to surplus land councils held in 1909 and 1911, a Black Hills council proposed for 1913-1914, a reservation legal case from 1916, and items concerning an estate that Brennan handled from 1907 to 1916.

The post-Pine Ridge and miscellaneous grouping contains correspondence, material on Indian councils held from 1866 to 1869. copies of treaties from 1868 and 1876, an article by Brennan on the Black Hills treaty, a diary kept by Valentine T. McGillycuddy while he was agent at Pine Ridge from 1879 to 1880, a letterbook of D. F. Royer while he was agent at Pine Ridge in 1890 and 1891. and other miscellaneous items. A manuscript, apparently written by Brennan, on the early history of Rapid City is also included in this grouping.

The John R. Brennan Family Papers provide materials that would aid in studies of Indian land problems, Indian-white relations, reservation affairs in the early 1900s, politics surrounding the Indian service in those years, and the early history of Rapid City. A typewritten inventory of the collection is available at the Historical Resource Center. For more information concerning the John R. Brennan Family Papers, contact the Manuscript Curator, South Dakota Historical Resource Center, 500 E. Capitol, Pierre, SD 57501.

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