As Americans moved into the Southwest, early ministers found two distinct communities—Native Americans and Roman Catholic Mexicans (New Mexicans)—and very few educational opportunities for either group. Because the men of the Board of Home Missions were reluctant to expand into the new territory, Sheldon Jackson turned to church women for support. In 1878, the Woman’s Executive Committee of Home Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. organized and dedicated themselves to financing and overseeing mission schools among “exceptional populations.”

The board considered individual community needs as the schools developed, with three models becoming most prevalent: the plaza day school, the boarding primary school, and the boarding secondary school. During the 1920s, the Board of National Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. took over the schools. As the public school programs in each state improved, the board closed the schools so that funding and resources could be focused elsewhere. The last of these schools, the Tucson Indian School, closed in 1960. The board encouraged local churches and communities to continue community programs, offering some small financial support.

The enduring history of mission education in the Southwest continues today in places like Cook College in Tempe, Arizona and Menaul School in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Many of the present-day schools in the Southwest use the academic models of the mission schools and sometimes even refurbish some of their buildings for use. Thus the legacy of the mission schools continues, both spiritually and temporally.
“Outfit for a Missionary Teacher from the Woman’s Executive Committee of Home Missions,” c.1881 (RG 305-3-1).

“Some of these days you may call us up by phone (if you have enough money). The poles are up now and soon we expect to see the wires. It will cost $.50 to phone Tucson, so you will continue to hear from us by mail!! Any way we can call for the Doctor without going 25 miles. Isn’t that splendid? Who ever thought San Miguel would have a telephone! Maybe we will have our plane, yet!”

— Elizabeth Wolfe letter to Anna Scott, Board of National Missions, March 24, 1934 (RG 414).
“There are always funny incidents when you teach a primary room. One day some of the little boys had stolen peaches from a nearby hogan [Navajo home]. As a punishment the Boys’ Director had some large placards made with the words, ‘I stole peaches,’ on them. The boys had to walk around the campus with these on their backs. As they passed the school window once, Eva, a little second grade girl said, ‘Miss Badger, I want to go walk with those boys.’ I tried to explain to her what they had done and what a disgrace it was. She thought a few minutes and then asked, ‘If I steal some tomatoes from the garden then would they let me have one of those on my back and march too?’ There are serious experiences as well as funny experiences in our work as missionaries.”

— Angeline Badger biographical statement on mission work, October 6, 1933 (RG 414).


“Typical Navajo Hogan.”
Five Continents, March 1936, Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., Board of Foreign Missions and Board of National Missions, New York.

Daily Schedule of missionary teacher at Presbyterian Day School, Chacon, New Mexico. c.1950 (Helen Carlock, RG 414).
“A few years ago our school had grown in numbers until the Catholic leaders were distressed. They had two visiting priests speak to the people. They told them that our school was the Devil’s school and if they sent their children to this school they all would be lost. About a dozen boys and girls left school. It was a sad day for us. But the next February when we had a series of meetings in our church, we had a large number in attendance and twenty-one united with the church. Almost every one of these are faithful and true now. Persecution hurts, but it often brings joy.”

— Annetta Bell biographical statement on mission work, January 1934 (RG 414).
“Our blackboard is at the Junction, so I am hoping next Saturday may see it put up. It will be such a joy to have blackboard space enough to put all the work on one wants to and yet be able to send a class to the board to work. It will make the schoolwork much easier and more satisfactory.”

— Orra M. Spear letter to Miss Edna Voss, January 13, 1923, (RG 414).
“Our girls have many struggles with the English language. One, a little girle [sic] in the midst of writing a letter came to ask me how to spell ‘gartas,’ as I understood the word. After asking her to repeat it several times, I spelled it – ‘g-a-r-t-e-r-s.’ Much to my dismay I found out later that she had written, ‘Please give my best garters to Uncle So-and-so, my garters to Aunt So-and-so, my best garters to cousins, etc.’ The next time I recognized the word as ‘regards’ when asked about it.”

— Ruth Barber missionary report, January 1934 (RG 414)