

Celebrating Native American Heritage Month

Recognizing the First Americans



This Plains Indian cloth doll from the 1920s is decorated with with tanned leather clothing and beadwork. It was one of 15 dolls featured on the Classic American Dolls stamp pane issued in 1997. Source: USPS

The early beginnings of honoring the first Americans started with Arthur C. Parker at the turn of the 20th century. Parker, a Cattaraugus Seneca and archaeologist for the New York State Museum, helped found the Society of American Indians in 1911. It was Parker who eventually persuaded the Boy Scouts of America to commemorate a day for “First Americans,” which they did from 1912 to 1915.

After that, various special days or weeks of celebration to honor Native Americans, held throughout the calendar year, were periodically established by private organizations or state governments.

On the national level, it wasn't until the late 1970s that Congress enacted legislation and subsequent presidents issued annual proclamations designating a day to celebrate and commemorate the nation's American Indian and Alaska Native heritage.

What started as a week of recognition signed by President Ronald Reagan in 1986, didn't become a month-long celebration until President George H. W. Bush approved a joint resolution of Congress recognizing the achievements

and contributions of Native Americans by designating November 1990 as “National American Indian Heritage Month.” Since 1995, Presidents Clinton, George W. Bush, Obama and Trump have issued similar proclamations, under various names. National American Indian Heritage Month celebrates and recognizes the accomplishments — past, present and future — of the peoples who were the original inhabitants, explorers and settlers of the United States.

American Indian images, names, and stories infuse American history and contemporary life. Go online to www.nativeamericanheritagemonth.gov to access resources assembled by The Library of Congress, National Archives and Records Administration, National Endowment for the Humanities, National Gallery of Art, National Park Service, Smithsonian Institution and United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

For a special collection of films, short stories and resources from public television go to www.pbs.org/specials/native-american-heritage-month.

Newspaper Activities:

Read your newspaper regularly and throughout the school year and look for other cultural celebrations. Save each celebration article in a folder. Organize the articles by cultures and dates that the celebration takes place. Compare these cultural celebrations. How are they similar and how are they different?

There is evidence of Native American culture all around us. It is not uncommon to find Indian names for lakes, rivers, counties, towns, streets, etc. See what evidence you can find in your newspaper and other resources of people who lived or visited here before European and other cultures settled the land that is now the United States. Share what you find as a class.

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