Affinity

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Celebrating the Histories and Traditions of Our Native Founders

As we start searching for that perfect pecan pie recipe and checking the Thanksgiving Day football schedule to coordinate our post-turkey naps, we are also reminded to honor the Native culture and people that established the “reason for the season.”

November is the official month dedicated to acknowledging and celebrating the heritage of Native American and Indigenous peoples and the original inhabitants of what is now the United States, as well as honoring the rich and diverse traditions, cultures, and histories of Native people. In 1990, President George H.W. Bush approved a House Joint Resolution acknowledging November as National Native American Heritage Month (NAHM), or also often referred to as National American Indian Heritage Month or National American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month.

November was chosen because the month concludes the traditional harvest season of Native American Indians and was generally a time of celebration and giving thanks. According to the National Congress of American Indians, the month is meant to celebrate the cultures, histories and contributions of Native people, as well as educate people about Native culture and the historical challenges Native people have faced.

When Europe "discovered" the Americas, there were 50 million Native Americans and Indigenous peoples living there, with 10 million living in what was to become the United States.

In 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act, which allowed the federal government to take Native-held land east of Mississippi and forcibly relocate Native people to “Indian territory” in what is now Oklahoma. The Trail of Tears was part of a series of forced displacements of approximately 60,000 Native Americans between 1830 and 1850. During that time, nearly 4,000 people died of disease, exposure and malnutrition.

In 1915, Red Fox James, a Blackfoot Indian, rode horseback to get endorsements from state governments to establish a day to honor American Indians. As a result, the first AmericanIndian Day was held in New York in May 1916. Dr. Arthur C. Parker, a Seneca Indian, the director of the Museum of Arts and Science in Rochester, N.Y. persuaded the Boy Scouts of America to set aside a day for the “First Americans” in 1915.

Despite these initial efforts, it wasn’t until 1924 that Congress enacted the Indian Citizenship Act, which granted citizenship to Native Americans. While Native Americans were also given the right to vote in 1924, it took another 40 years for all 50 states to allow them voting rights.

Despite the historical challenges, Indigenous people have continued to make an impact on U.S. society and represent their diverse heritage. During World War II, the U.S. government enlisted the help of Native Americans, known as code talkers, who used the Navajo language to transmit top-secret information to allied forces. Native innovation has also brought us traditional farming and many items we use every day, such as rubber, corn, mouthwash, and kayaks.

Today, there are over 9 million Native Americans and Native Alaskans living in the U.S. In 2020, 9.1 million people in the U.S. identified as Native American and Alaska Native, which accounts for 2.9% of the population.

Alaska has the largest population of Native Americans in the U.S., followed closely by Oklahoma. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there are approximately 324 American Indian reservations in the U.S. and 326 Indian land areas administered as federal Indian reservations. There are currently 574 federally recognized tribes. Cherokee, Navajo and Latin American Indian are the three largest Native American tribes, and Yup'ik, Inupiat, and Tlingit-Haida are the three largest Alaskan Native tribes. There are approximately 175 Indigenous languages spoken in the U.S. today.

Indigenous people continue to make strides to bring awareness, respect, and representation of their culture. In 2020, The Washington Redskins changed their name from the Washington "Redskins," a slur against Indigenous Americans, to The Washington Football team. The Cleveland Indians followed suit and are now known as the Cleveland Guardians. In 2021, Deb Haaland, a member of the Pueblo of Laguna and a 35th generation New Mexican, became the first Native American cabinet member, serving as the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Interior. Secretary Haaland recently swore in Bryan Newland, a citizen of the Bay Mills Indian Community (Ojibwe) and former Tribal President, as Assistant Secretary.

As our country continues to make conscionable efforts to honor and celebrate the diverse heritage of Native Americans, we dedicate this month to offering an increased awareness and acknowledgment of the historical struggles Indigenous people have faced in the U.S. and to celebrate the achievements and advancements within their culture and community.