



U.S. Department of the Interior
Office of the Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs
Office of Public Affairs

National American Indian Heritage Month

Many Indian and non-Indian Americans have urged that a special day be set aside to honor American Indians. Legislation has been proposed in the Congress that would “designate the fourth Friday in September of every year as American Indian Day.” There has also been legislation proposing to establish a “Native American Awareness Week” during the fourth week in September. Now, the President signs a proclamation designating the month of November as “National American Indian Heritage Month.

Modern Almanacs list such a day under “Day usually observed-not legal holidays” as the fourth Friday in September. This means business as usual, although special events, such as pow-wows, parades and lectures might mark the day.

One of the first proponents of an American Indian Day was Dr. Arthur C. Parker, a Seneca Indian, who was the Director of the Museum of Arts and Sciences, Rochester, N.Y. He persuaded the Boy Scouts of America to set aside a day for the “First Americans,” and for three years they adopted such a day. In 1915, the annual Congress of the American Indian Association, held at Lawrence, Kansas, formally approved the plan. It directed its president, the Rev. Sherman Coolidge, an Arapaho Indian minister, to call upon the country to observe such a day. He issued a proclamation September 28, 1915, which declared the second Saturday of each May as an American Indian Day and contained the first formal appeal for recognition of Indians as citizens.

The year before this proclamation was issued, Red Fox James, a Blackfeet Indian, rode from state to state on his horse seeking approval for the celebration of a day in honor of Indian people. He later presented the endorsements of 24 state governors at the White House on December 14, 1915.

The first American Indian Day was observed on the second Saturday in May 1916 when the governor of New York fixed that day for a state observance. Several states celebrated the fourth Friday in September as American Indian Day. In Illinois, for example, it became the day by legislative enactment in 1919. In Massachusetts, in accordance with a law passed in 1935, the Governor issued a proclamation naming the day that will become American Indian Day for any given year. In South Dakota, Columbus Day was dedicated as American Indian Day in 1990. Contact officials in your state to see if such a designation is made.

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From 2001 to the present, President George W. Bush has issued a proclamation designating the month of November as “National American Indian Heritage Month.”

On November 2, 1995, President William Jefferson Clinton issued a proclamation designating the month of November as “National American Indian Heritage Month.”

On November 5, 1994, President Clinton issued a proclamation based on Senate Joint Resolution 271, designating the month of November 1994 as “National American Indian Heritage Month.”

On March 2, 1992, President George H.W. Bush issued a proclamation designating 1992 as the “Year of the American Indian” based on legislation by Congress (Public Law 102-188).

On August 3, 1990, a Joint Resolution designating the month of November 1990, as “National American Indian Heritage Month” was approved by President Bush, becoming Public Law 101-343 (104 Stat. 391).

On December 5, 1989, President Bush issued a proclamation based on Senate Joint Resolution 218, designating the week of December 3-9, 1989, as “National American Indian Heritage Week.”

On September 23, 1988, President Ronald Reagan signed a Senate Joint Resolution designating September 23-30, as “National American Indian Heritage Week.”

In 1987, the week of November 22-28 was proclaimed as “American Indian Week” by President Reagan, pursuant to Senate Joint Resolution 53.

Prior to this, President Reagan had twice earlier designated an American Indian Day or Week. In 1986, he signed Senate Joint Resolution 390, which designated November 23-30 as “American Indian Week”, and during his first term he named May 13, 1983, as “American Indian Day.”

In 1976, Senate Joint Resolution 209 authorized the President to proclaim the week of October 10-16, 1976, as “Native American Awareness Week.”

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