



The Creation of National American Indian & Alaska Native Heritage Month

A Brief History

Source: Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs

What began at the turn of the century as an effort to gain a day of recognition for the significant contributions the First Americans made to the establishment and growth of the United States has resulted in the month of November being designated for that purpose.

Early Proponents

One of the early proponents of an American Indian Day was Dr. Arthur C. Parker, a Seneca Indian who was the Director of the Museum of Arts and Science in Rochester, New York. He persuaded the Boy Scouts of America to set aside a day for the "First Americans," and for three years the Scouts adopted such a day. In 1915, at the annual Congress of the American Indian Association meeting in Lawrence, Kansas, a plan celebrating American Indian Day was formally approved. The Association directed its president, Rev. Sherman Coolidge, an Arapahoe, to call upon the country to set aside a day of recognition. Rev. Coolidge issued a proclamation on September 28, 1915, which declared the second Saturday of May as American Indian Day and contained the first formal appeal for recognition of American Indians as citizens.

The year before this proclamation was issued, Red Fox James, a Blackfeet Indian, rode horseback from state to state, seeking approval for a day to honor American Indians. On December 14, 1915, Red Fox James presented the endorsements of 24 state governments to the White House. There is no record, however, of such a national day being proclaimed.

State Celebrations

The first American Indian Day to be celebrated in a state was declared on the second Saturday in May 1916 by the governor of New York. Several states celebrate the fourth Friday in September. In Illinois, for example, legislators enacted such a day in 1919. Presently, several states have designated Columbus Day as Native American Day, but it continues to be a day we observe without any legal recognition as a national holiday.

Heritage Months

In 1990 President George H. W. Bush approved a joint resolution designating November 1990 as "National American Indian Heritage Month." Similar proclamations have been issued each year since 1994.

National American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month is celebrated to recognize the intertribal cultures and to educate the public about the heritage, history, art, and traditions of the American Indian and Alaska Native people.