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*National Museum of the American Indian*

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### **Indigenous Peoples' Day: Rethinking How We Celebrate American History**

October 11th, 2019, 4:00PM / BY Dennis W. Zotigh and Renee Gokey



Johns Hopkins University observed Indigenous Peoples' Day for the first time in 2018. "The culture around Columbus and how Natives are viewed is slowly changing," Indigenous Students at Hopkins (ISH) president Tyra Andrews said that day. "It's really important, especially for the younger generations." Organized by ISH and the university's Office of Multicultural Affairs, the commemoration included a campus powwow and an evening presentation by Victoria O'Keefe (Cherokee and Seminole of Oklahoma), assistant professor in the Center for American Indian Health at the Bloomberg School of Public Health. (Photo courtesy of Tom Jefferson Jr.)

**"The most American thing about America is American Indians." —Paul Chaat Smith (Comanche)**

The first documented observance of Columbus Day in the United States took place in New York City in 1792, on the 300th anniversary of Columbus's landfall in the Western Hemisphere. The holiday originated as an annual celebration of Italian-American heritage in San Francisco in 1869. In 1934, at the request of the Knights of Columbus and New York City's Italian community, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt declared the first national observance of Columbus Day. President Roosevelt and the U.S. Congress made October 12 a national holiday three years later. In 1972 President Richard Nixon signed a proclamation making the official date of the holiday the second Monday in October.

Generations of Native people, however, throughout the Western Hemisphere have protested Columbus Day. In the forefront of their minds is the fact the colonial takeovers of the Americas, starting with Columbus, led to the deaths of millions of Native people and the forced assimilation of survivors.

In 1977 participants at the United Nations International Conference on Discrimination against Indigenous Populations in the Americas proposed that Indigenous Peoples' Day replace Columbus Day. Indigenous Peoples' Day recognizes that Native people are the first inhabitants of the Americas, including the lands that later became the United States of America. And it urges Americans to rethink history.

The movement to replace Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples' Day or Native American Day has gained momentum and spread to states, cities, and towns across the United States. The first state to rename Columbus Day was South Dakota in 1990. Hawai'i has also changed the name of its October 12 holiday to Discoverers' Day, in honor of the Polynesian navigators who peopled the islands. Berkeley, California, became the first city to make the change in 1992, when the city council renamed Columbus Day as Indigenous Peoples' Day. In 2015 an estimated 6,000 Native people and their supporters gathered at Randall's Island, New York, to recognize the survival of the Indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere. The demonstration's success and the worldwide media attention it attracted planted the seeds for creating an Indigenous Peoples' Day in New York City. This year the nation's capital [passed a resolution](#) to change the holiday to Indigenous Peoples' Day. Universities and schools across the country are also observing the new commemoration.

The following states and the District of Columbia now observe Native American or Indigenous Peoples' Day, in place of or in addition to Columbus Day:

- Alabama
- Alaska
- District of Columbia
- Hawai'i
- Idaho
- Maine
- Michigan
- Minnesota
- New Mexico
- North Carolina
- Oklahoma
- Oregon
- South Dakota
- Vermont
- Wisconsin

Smaller jurisdictions have often led the way, including:

- Anchorage, Alaska
- Flagstaff and Phoenix, Arizona
- Eureka Springs, Arkansas
- Berkeley, Burbank, Long Beach, Los Angeles, San Fernando, San Francisco, San Luis Obispo, Santa Cruz, South Lake Tahoe, and Watsonville, California
- Aspen, Boulder, Denver, and Durango, Colorado
- Bridgeport and West Hartford, Connecticut
- South Fulton, Georgia
- Boise and Moscow, Idaho
- Evanston and Oak Park, Illinois
- Bloomington, Indiana
- Davenport, Iowa City, Tama, and Toledo, Iowa
- Lawrence and Wichita, Kansas
- Berea, Brodhead, Burnside, Corbin, Crab Orchard, Frankfort, Harrodsburg, Hopkinsville, Junction City, Lancaster, Liberty, Livingston, London, Louisville, Mt. Vernon, Perryville, Prestonsburg, Richmond, Russell Springs, Science Hill, Somerset, Springfield, Stanford, and Taylorsville, Kentucky
- Bangor, Bar Harbor, Belfast, Brunswick, Gouldsboro, Orono, Portland, and Starks, Maine

- Amherst, Brookline, Cambridge, Great Barrington, Northampton, and Somerville, Massachusetts
- Alpena, Ann Arbor, Detroit, East Lansing, Ferndale, Traverse City, and Ypsilanti, Michigan
- Bemidji, Cook County, Grand Marais, Grand Rapids, Mankato, Minneapolis, Moorehead, St. Paul, and Red Wing, Minnesota
- Kansas City and St. Louis, Missouri
- Bozeman and Helena, Montana
- Lincoln, Nebraska
- Reno, Nevada
- Durham, New Hampshire
- Newark and Princeton, New Jersey
- Albuquerque and Santa Fe, New Mexico
- Akron, Ithaca, Newstead, Rochester, the Village of Lewiston, and Woodstock, New York
- Asheville, Burlington, Carrboro, Hillsborough, and Kernersville, North Carolina
- Fargo, Grand Forks, North Dakota
- Columbus, Cincinnati, and Oberlin, Ohio
- Anadarko, El Reno, Lawton, Norman, Oklahoma City, Okmulgee, Tahlequah, and Tulsa, Oklahoma
- Corvallis, Eugene, and Portland, Oregon
- Lancaster and Sharpsburg, Pennsylvania
- Austin, Bexar County, Dallas, and San Antonio, Texas
- Nashville, Tennessee
- Salt Lake City, Utah
- Alexandria, Charlottesville, Falls Church, and Richmond, Virginia
- Bainbridge Island, Olympia, Pullman, Seattle, Spokane, Tacoma, and Yakima, Washington
- Harpers Ferry, West Virginia
- Eau Claire, La Crosse, Madison, Marathon Country, and Wasau, Wisconsin

Even so, mythology about Columbus and the “discovery” of the Americas continues to be many American children’s first classroom lesson about encountering different cultures, ethnicities, and peoples. Teaching more accurate and complete narratives and differing perspectives is key to our society’s rethinking its history. Recently, the museum has hosted Indigenous Peoples’ Curriculum Days and Teach-Ins at the beginning of the school year in Washington and New York. [Teaching for Change](#), a Washington-based national education organization, and the museum’s Education Office work with teachers of students from kindergarten through 12th grade in sessions that range from student activism to defend the environment or abolish Columbus Day; to skills such as critical literacy, art, and facilitated dialogue; to inquiry-based lessons available through the museum’s online education initiative [Native Knowledge 360°](#).

In 2018 Sarah Shear, assistant professor of Social Studies Education at Penn State University–Altoona, gave the keynote presentation, based on research on U.S. history standards from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. In 2015, Dr. Shear and her collaborators Ryan T. Knowles, Gregory J. Soden, and Antonio J. Castro published data showing that 87 percent of the references to Native Americans in U.S. curricula are in the context of American history before 1900. “The narrative presented in U.S. history standards,” they write, “when analyzed with a critical eye, directed students to see Indigenous Peoples as a long since forgotten episode in the country’s development.” Shear and her colleagues see serious implications in the way the United States teaches its history:

When one looks at the larger picture painted by the quantitative data, it is easy to argue that the narrative of U.S. history is painfully one sided in its telling of the American narrative, especially with regard to Indigenous Peoples’ experiences. . . .

The qualitative findings further illuminate a Euro-American narrative that reinstitutes the marginalization of

Indigenous cultures and knowledge. Indigenous Peoples are left in the shadows of Euro-America's destiny, while the cooperation and conflict model provides justification for the eventual termination of Indigenous Peoples from the American landscape and historical narrative. Finally, a tone of detachment, especially with long lists of legal and political terms, dismisses the humanity of Indigenous cultures and experiences in the United States.

This year, the co-editors of *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*—librarian and educator Dr. Debbie Reese (Nambé Owingeh) and historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz—headlined workshops in Washington and New York. Reese, founder of the highly respected resource [American Indians in Children's Literature](#), describe their work on *An Indigenous People's History* as shining bright lights on historic episodes that are left out of most books. “As much as we could,” Reese says, “we wanted to give readers the kind of information that’s known within Native families, communities, and nations. We believe that it is vital that all citizens of the United States know more about the people whom we regard, as a society, as being heroic. There *are* different points of view.”

Things are changing. On Monday, October 14, states, cities, towns, counties, community groups, churches, universities, schools, and other institutions will observe Indigenous Peoples' Day or Native American Day with activities that raise awareness of the rich history, culture, and traditions of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. They will do so thanks to Native people, their supporters, and others who have gathered for decades and continue to gather now at prayer vigils, powwows, symposiums, concerts, lectures, rallies, and classrooms to help America rethink American history.

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**Tags:**

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