

American Indian Heritage Month

What started 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 this Nation has resulted in a whole month being designated for that purpose. But, it has been a long and winding trail that has taken many turns during the last 84 years that has not resulted in an "official day" of recognition.

For many years, Indians and non-Indians have urged that a special day be set aside to honor America's first citizens. From time to time, legislation was proposed in the U.S. Congress that would designate the Fourth Friday in September of each year as American Indian Day. There has also been legislation that would establish a Native American Awareness Week the fourth week in September. Introduction of these bills, none of which were passed by Congress, resulted in modern day almanacs listing the fourth Friday in September as American Indian Day under the heading "Day usually observed -- not legal holidays".

One of the very 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 Science, Rochester, NY. 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 meeting in Lawrence, Kansas, formally approved a plan. It directed its President, the Rev. Sherman Coolidge, an Arapahoe, to call upon the country to observe such a day. He issued a proclamation on 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 horseback from state to state seeking approval for the celebration of a day in honor of Indians. He later presented the endorsements of 24 state governments at the White House on December 14, 1915. However, there is no record of such a national day being proclaimed.

The first American Indian Day 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, it became that 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. Presently, several states have designated Columbus day as Native American Day, but, it continues to be a day we observe without any recognition as a legal holiday.

Presidential Proclamations designating National Native American Heritage Month

Since 1995, President Clinton has issued a proclamation, each year, 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 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 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 that, 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".

N.A.I.A.N. Heritage Month