

This Day in History... May 13, 1916

First Native American Day

One of the first recorded celebrations of Native American Day was held on May 13, 1916, in New York. Other states adopted similar days before the first national celebrations were held in 1976. Today, Native American Heritage Day is held in November, which is also American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month.

Calls for increased recognition began in the early 1900s. One of the leading proponents was Dr. Arthur Caswell Parker, a relative of Brigadier General Ely S. Parker, who had been secretary to Ulysses S. Grant during the Civil War and the first American Indian Commissioner of Indian Affairs. Dr. Parker had founded several organizations dedicated to American Indian rights and was a leading advocate for them to get US citizenship.



1923 stamp picturing Hollow Horn Bear.



The smallest US postage stamp.

Another contributor to the cause was Reverend Red Fox James. In 1914 he made a 4,000-mile journey on horseback to the White House to request the president establish an "Indian Day." He made another trip the following year, going state-to-state pursuing support from governors. In December 1915, he presented the White House with a petition supported by 24 governors.

On September 18, 1915, Arapaho minister Reverend Sherman Coolidge issued a proclamation declaring the second Saturday in May as "American Indian Day." The following year, New York became the first state to issue a formal designation of American Indian Day. They set the second Saturday in May, falling on May 13 in 1916, as American Indian Day.

In the years to come, several other states adopted the fourth Friday in September as American Indian Day. And in 1924, Congress passed the Citizenship Act, which granted citizenship to all US-born American Indians. The act was later expanded to include Alaska Natives.

Additional state days were proclaimed over the years. Then in 1976, President Gerald Ford established a Native American Awareness Week in October. Since then, America's presidents and Congress have designated a day, a week, or a month each year to honor American Indians and Alaska Natives.



This stamp was issued for the 100th anniversary of the arrival of the Chickasaw, Choctaw, Cherokee, Creek, and Seminole Indian tribes in Oklahoma.



Stamp pictures a traditional Tlingit Totem.

In 1977, the United Nations declared the first Indigenous Peoples Day during the International Conference on Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations in the Americas. In 1989, South Dakota established 1990 as the Year of Reconciliation for Native Americans and changed Columbus Day to Native American Day. In 1992, President George H.W. Bush declared the Year of the American Indian. That year also marked some of the first celebrations of Indigenous Peoples' Day on the second Monday in October (in place of Columbus Day). Two years later the United Nations designated August 9 as the International Day of the World's Indigenous People.

In 2009, Congress passed legislation that established the Friday after Thanksgiving as Native American Heritage Day. November is also American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month.



Strip picturing five American Indian dances.

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