

Americans

American Indian images, names, and stories infuse American history and contemporary life.

The images are everywhere, from the Land O'Lakes butter maiden to the Cleveland Indians' mascot, and from classic Westerns and cartoons to episodes of Seinfeld and South Park. American Indian names are everywhere too, from state, city, and street names to the Tomahawk missile. *Americans* highlights the ways in which American Indians have been part of the nation's identity since before the country began. Familiar historical events of Pocahontas's life, the Trail of Tears, and the Battle of Little Bighorn continue to speak to the imagination of many.

How is it that Indians can be so present and so absent in American life? Pervasive, powerful, at times demeaning, the images, names, and stories reveal the deep connection between Americans and American Indians as well as how Indians have been embedded in unexpected ways in the history, pop culture, and identity of the United States.

The exhibition surrounds visitors with images and objects from popular culture and delves into these three historical events. It invites visitors to explore this complicated history and to share local stories about Native American history and culture.

The exhibition provides a great opportunity for host organizations to explore how the history of American Indians in their areas are incorporated into local stories. Are American Indian stories revered in your community? Or are those connections misunderstood or misused? How much of your community's celebrated places, street names, local businesses, cultural icons and people have

connections to American Indian stories? With support from state humanities councils and other state partners, *Americans* provides an interesting chance to generate relationships and conversations with local American Indian groups and organizations.

Smithsonian Collaborator

Museum on Main Street is working directly with lead curator Paul Chaat Smith (Comanche) from the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) to adapt *Americans* for travel. Photographs, paintings, and archival collections from the Smithsonian along with tactile and digital experiences will be used to bring the exhibit to life.



Hollow Horn Bear postage stamp, 1923
National Postal Museum, Smithsonian



1948 Indian Chief motorcycle with headrest fender ornament, on loan from the Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum, Birmingham, Alabama. Photo by Matailong Du

Content

Four copies of this multi-lingual exhibition will open August 2025 and be available for booking for six years. The exhibition explores stories that highlight how deeply intertwined American Indians are in the culture of the United States and examines the complexity of those stories:

- ◆ **The Invention of Thanksgiving:** A video interview with the exhibition’s curator, Paul Chaat Smith, reveals surprising facts about Thanksgiving. What was the initial event really about? Why did Thanksgiving become such an iconic part of American culture? What prompted it to be celebrated so many years after the first Thanksgiving? What does Thanksgiving tell us about the relationships between American Indians and other Americans?
- ◆ **Pocahontas: Queen of America:** Pocahontas is an iconic figure in American history. An American Indian woman, prominent in the history of colonial Virginia, Pocahontas’ story has been retold many times, growing more romantic and fanciful with each retelling. But, how much of her story is myth and what do we really know? Many Americans love Pocahontas and have revered her for generations. Towns, streets and schools are named after her. People seek to prove ancestral links to her. What does Pocahontas’ story tell us about how American Indians are viewed in American history?
- ◆ **The Removal Act:** To this day the Indian Removal Act of 1830 remains one of the boldest and most breathtaking laws in American history. It imagined a country free of American Indians and resulted in the forced relocation of thousands of Indians. Despite fierce debates over the act, Americans convinced themselves that removal would be good for the economy and even good for Indians. What was supposed to be a relatively quick and manageable project spanned nine U.S. presidencies and cost more than 40 times the original estimate. In total about 68,000 Indians were exiled from their southeastern homelands. In the early 1900s, a handful of Cherokee activists began to popularize the phrase “trail of tears.” It later became shorthand for policies toward all American Indians. The core meaning of the phrase, still refers to a moment of national shame and a betrayal of American values. The Trail of Tears resonates in American conversation because the country is still coming to terms with what happened and its lasting impact.
- ◆ **The Indians Win:** In 1876 the United States was finally emerging from the devastation of the Civil War. Manifest destiny was largely achieved. Indian conflicts still existed, but they were a distant problem. So, it was inconceivable, just days after celebrating the country’s 100th birthday, for Americans to learn that Indians in Montana had wiped out the famous general George A. Custer and 200 of his men. The entire country was in disbelief, grief, and rage. The Lakota and Northern Cheyenne had won the battle. But eight months later the United States won the Great Sioux War and confined nearly all the Plains Indians to reservations. However, Little Bighorn’s legacy lived on. It was replayed over and over through official hearings, staged presentations, elaborate reenactments, and later in movies and on TV. Why have Americans been obsessed with this one particular loss? Why did the Lakota Indians that won at Little Bighorn become celebrities? This fascination with Little Bighorn sheds light on Americans’ complicated relationships with and views of American Indians.
- ◆ **Americans Explained:** The images of Indians that Americans see daily, and the examples presented in this exhibition offer a new way of understanding a few familiar events. Thanksgiving was a modern invention. Pocahontas was a key figure in the country’s founding. The Trail of Tears was a vast national project that reshaped the entire country. Little Bighorn was the moment when, after killing 200 American soldiers, Indians became the country’s unofficial mascots. Together these stories offer an optimistic and provocative way to understand American history and the American present. Like the ubiquitous images of Indians, they give us the power to see into the county’s deepest foundations and remind us that Indians are an integral part of American history, culture, and identity.