

Representations of Native Americans in Films, Local History Publications, and School Mascots

Native American ideas about government and society influenced the development of United States government at the time of the American Revolution. The following activities consider how Native peoples have been represented in films, local historical publications, and school names and mascots and how those representations have shaped people's attitudes.

More than 8 million American Indian and Alaska Native people live in the United States today, and those numbers are projected to rise to 10 million by 2060 ([Indian Country Demographics](#), *National Congress of American Indians*, June 2020).

In 2021, [October 11 was declared Indigenous Peoples' Day](#) by President Joe Biden and November was proclaimed [National Native American Heritage Month](#).



Reverse of the [1 US dollar coin - 2020](#) - series "Native Americans" by United States Mint picture
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Most students, however, learn little about Native people, their lives, cultures, and achievements in schools. The indigenous education organization [IllumiNative](#) reported that most (87%) state level history standards do not address Native history past 1900.

Do you know the [Native American tribes in your state](#)? Or the roles of [Native American Code Talkers in World War II](#)? Or the story of Elizabeth Peratrovich, a member of the Tlingit Nation in Alaska whose efforts led to the passage of the nation's first anti-discrimination law in 1945?

Much of what students learn about Native history comes from the media, including movies and television, local history publications, and imagery associated with local and national sports teams.

Hollywood movies and network television shows have long portrayed First American indigenous people in grossly stereotypical terms. Men are depicted as warriors and medicine men. Women are portrayed as either objects of desire or inconsequential members of a tribe. Native peoples are often shown as living in the wilderness or on reservations even though 60% of today's American Indian and Alaska Native population live in cities ([5 Common Indigenous Stereotypes in Film and Television](#), *ThoughtCo.*, January 2021).

Around the country, there are increasing efforts by local tourism and community groups to tell the stories of those left out or marginalized in history through tours, exhibits, and celebrations of important individuals and significant events in Native American, Black, women, and LGBTQ history. For example, "Navajo Tours USA" present Native history in New Mexico, while "[Nez Perce Tourism](#)" explores Native sites in the Pacific Northwest.

Other cities have designed tours that showcase the hidden histories and untold stories of traditionally marginalized groups of individuals. There is an "Unfiltered Truth Collection" in Louisville, Kentucky, a "Truth and Reconciliation" Tour in Montgomery, Alabama, a Black Heritage Trail in Boston, and the Missouri Historical Society operates "Renegade STL"

that presents Black, women's and LGBTQ history tours in St. Louis ("[Historical Tours Reach Deeper to Include People Long Left Out](#)," *Sunday Travel, Boston Sunday Globe*, November 7, 2021, pp. 11,13).



[Watch on YouTube](#)

Activity 1: Analyze how Native Americans are Portrayed in Movies

- Compare the representation of Native Americans in '[Smoke Signal](#)' by Chris Eyre to '[Alone Yet Not Alone](#)' by Ray Bengston and George Escobar.
- Then, consider:
 - What characters are the focus of each film?
 - What is the attitude towards Native Americans?
 - What stereotypes are upheld in each film? Stereotypes can be used to exoticize groups - is this idea apparent in the films?
 - Whose point of view is represented?
 - Who directed these movies and who acted in them?
- **Design a video, [podcast](#), or website** to present your findings and inform others about how Native Americans are portrayed in movies.

Activity 2: Design a Film or TV show About Native Americans' Influence on the U.S. Government

- Explore the following resources:
 - [The Great Law of Peace](#), YouTube video
 - [The Iroquois Confederacy](#), YouTube video
 - [Iroquois Confederacy Timeline: 1600s to 1973](#)
 - [The Six Nations Confederacy during the American Revolution](#), Fort Stanwix National Monument, National Park Service
 - [Viral Meme Says Constitution Owes Its Nation of Democracy to the Iroquois](#), *Politifact* (December 2, 2014)
 - [How the Iroquois Great Law of Peace Shaped U.S. Democracy](#), Native Voices, PBS.
 - [Iroquois Constitution: A Forerunner to Colonists' Democratic Principles](#)
- Then, **write a script for a movie or television show** that portrays Native Americans accurately and showcases how Native American government shaped the U.S. government.
 - Consider:
 - What is the name and setting of the movie or show?
 - Who are the main characters and what are their lives like?
 - What is the primary issue or conflict in your story?

Activity 3: Research & Redesign the First American History of the Place Where You Live Today

- Our college, the University of Massachusetts Amherst, is built on the lands and waters of the Kwinitekw Valley, home to the Nonotuck peoples and all their relations. **Who were the First Americans who lived where you now live?**
- Analyze how local websites (e.g., school website, town/city council website) and history materials (e.g., guidebooks and tourist promotion materials; school system curriculum) present First Americans who were the original owners of the land on which you live today.
 - What imagery, if any, do they use to portray First Americans? Are the images positive or negative? What is emphasized in the images? What is left out?
 - What language is used to describe First Americans? Is the language positive or negative? What information is presented? What information is left out?
- Then, complete one of the following tasks:
 - **Design or redesign a historical webpage** for your school/town to present an accurate representation of the First Americans who made your community their homelands.
 - **Design an Augmented Reality Exhibit** (see "[Walk of Notables](#)" and [Kinfolk AR App](#)) **or Interactive Map Tour** featuring the hidden histories and untold stories of Native Americans in your community.
 - Augmented Reality Tool: [Reality Composer](#)
 - Interactive Map Tool: [Google My Maps](#)

Activity 4: Propose a Culturally and Historically Fair Mascot or Team Name for Your School

- **Question:** How can Native American peoples and cultures be fairly represented in school mascots or names?
 - The *Wall Street Journal* reported that in 2023 an [estimated 1900 schools in the U.S. still have indigenous-inspired team names](#), including high schools with mascots named Indians (783), Warriors (406), Braves (227), or Chiefs (181).
- **Action:** Propose an action plan or public policy to support more inclusive mascot, team names, and imagery for schools in your district or community. Also, consider the following...would you support any of the following:
 - Allow communities to decide to keep or eliminate school mascots by voting.
 - Support state-wide legislation to eliminate Native American mascots in all public schools.
 - Let teachers and students make decisions about mascots voluntarily.
 - Have school administrators and school committees make decisions about mascot policies.
 - Require Native American studies as part of the history/social studies curriculum in elementary, middle and high schools.
- **Resources**
 - [National School Mascots Tracking Database](#), National Congress of American Indians (2021)
 - [2,128 Native American Mascots People Aren't Talking About](#) from *FiveThirtyEight*, September 2014.
 - [Timeline - A Century of Racist Sports Team Names](#), Mother Jones
 - [UnLearning Sports Mascots](#) from FiveColleges in Massachusetts.
 - [Native Americans Blast Redskins Gambit to Defuse Name Controversy with Financial Contributions](#), March 24, 2014.

You will find additional activities about the use of Native American mascots in public schools in [Topic 6.1](#).

Additional Resources

- [Stereotypes of Contemporary Native American Indian Characters in Recent Popular Media](#) (UMass ScholarWorks)
- [Why I Won't Wear War Paint and Feathers in a Movie Again](#) - Time
- [Itam Hakim Hopiit](#) (1985) by Victor Masayesva: Hopi filmmaker

Connecting to the Building Democracy for All eBook

[Building Democracy for All: The Iroquois Confederacy and the Great Law of Peace](#)

Connecting to the Standards

- [Massachusetts Civics & Government Standards](#)
 - *Analyze the evidence for arguments that the principles of the system of government of the United States were influenced by the governments of Native Peoples* (Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for History and Social Studies) [8.T1.5]
- [AP U.S. History](#)
 - Key Concept 1.1
 - Key Concept 3.2
- [ISTE Standards](#)
 - Digital Citizen
 - 2c: Students demonstrate an understanding of and respect for the rights and obligations of using and sharing intellectual property.
 - Knowledge Constructor
 - 3a: Students plan and employ effective research strategies to locate information and other resources for their intellectual or creative pursuits.
 - 3b: Students evaluate the accuracy, perspective, credibility and relevance of information, media, data, or other resources.
 - 3d: Students build knowledge by actively exploring real-world issues and problems, developing ideas and theories and pursuing answers and solutions.
 - Creative Communicator
 - 6a: Students choose the appropriate platforms and tools for meeting the desired objectives of their creation or communication.
 - 6b: Students create original works or responsibly repurpose or remix digital resources into new creations.
 - 6d: Students publish or present content that customizes the message and medium for the intended audiences.
- [DLCS Standards](#)
 - Ethics and Laws (CAS.b)
 - Interpersonal and Societal Impact (CAS.c)
 - Digital Tools (DTC.a)
 - Collaboration and Communication (DTC.b)
 - Research (DTC.c)
- [English Language Arts > History/Social Studies Common Core Standards](#)
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.6
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.8
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.6
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.9
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.6
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7
 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.8
- [English/Language Arts Common Core Standards](#)



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