

Uncovering America's Indigenous History

The stories of indigenous peoples are too often forgotten or overlooked. At best, these stories are oversimplified and turned into caricature.

The opening of the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian in 2004, marked a turning point in our nation's efforts to not only recognize, but also celebrate our country's indigenous history. In addition to the National Museum of the American Indian, the National Museum of American History, the National Portrait Gallery, and the Smithsonian American Art Museum also provide their own public exhibitions and resources to learn about Native American history in broader historical and artistic contexts.

Here, we have highlighted some online resources from the Smithsonian Learning Lab that you can use in the classroom or at home to explore the history of Native America and learn more about important indigenous leaders.

[Unsettling the Continent, 1492–1776](https://americanhistory.si.edu/many-voices-exhibition/unsettling-continent-1492-1776)

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On this website, students can learn about how indigenous peoples across North and South America were displaced from their ancestral homelands by Europeans, who came to colonize the land, and African slaves who were brought by Europeans. Featured content explores English colonization on the East Coast, as well as New France, and Spanish New Mexico. The video from the History Channel on the main page is a great introduction.

Extension activity: Research the history of indigenous peoples in the area where you live. What native groups inhabited the land you currently live on? Does this group still exist today?

[Native Resistance Then and Now](https://americanhistory.si.edu/becoming-us/resistance/native-resistance)

<https://americanhistory.si.edu/becoming-us/resistance/native-resistance>

This resource from the National Museum of American History is a fully-developed lesson plan that aims to challenge stereotypical and monolithic depictions of Native Americans by looking at how various groups resisted colonization prior to 1900 and fought for their rights.

[Borders within the United States: Indian Boarding Schools and Assimilation](https://americanhistory.si.edu/becoming-us/borderlands/borders-within-united-states)

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This is another lesson plan from the National Museum of American History that examines Indian boarding schools, where young Native children were forced to attend and assimilate into "American" culture.

Extension activity: What traditions does your family have?

Do some family research that incorporates biological, cultural, and ethnic characteristics. Interview family members to discover your roots. You never know what may surprise you!

Consider the following questions:

- What cultural traditions has your family kept? Why is it important to keep these practices?
- Which traditions have fallen out of practice? If you can, explain why (or hypothesize why) this has occurred.
- How would you feel if you had to hide or suppress these traditions?
- What does it mean to have multiple identities? Do you change or alter your identity in different situations?

The National Portrait Gallery

The following resources from the National Portrait Gallery introduce students to prominent indigenous leaders and figures. Students investigate how each figure is depicted by historical records and in art.

Tecumseh: Perceptions and Realities

https://npg.si.edu/exhibit/1812/lessons/lesson_1812_tecumseh.pdf

Pocahontas: Learning to Look (c.1595–1617)

<https://npg.si.edu/learn/classroom-resource/pocahontas-c1595%E2%80%931617>

Sequoyah: Learning to Look (c. 1770–c. 1843)

<https://npg.si.edu/learn/classroom-resource/sequoyah-c-1770%E2%80%931843>

Chief Joseph: Learning to Look (ca. 1840–1904)

<https://npg.si.edu/learn/classroom-resource/chief-joseph>

Extension activity: How are Native Americans and indigenous peoples portrayed in popular media? Use the question prompts featured in the above activities to apply critical analysis to depictions in film, literature, video games – any media you choose!

Indigenous Traditions

For explorations of indigenous traditions from the American Southwest and Mexico, the following resources are great places to start.

The Return to Aztlán by Alfredo Arreguín

https://npg.si.edu/sites/default/files/the_return_to_aztlan_by_alfredo_arreguin.pdf

America Past and Present: Latino Art & Culture

https://s3.amazonaws.com/assets.saam.media/files/documents/2017-09/education_guide_mixing_cultures.pdf

Additional resources on indigenous culture and history can be found on the website of the National Museum of the American Indian.

<https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/resources.cshtml>