

ALABAMIANS, AMERICANS, AND AMERICAN INDIANS

The Smithsonian exhibit *Americans* will travel to five communities across the state in 2026-2027: Atmore, Wetumpka, Florence, Scottsboro, and Foley. The exhibit asks why American Indian names, images, and stories remain everywhere in U.S. life, and what that presence tells us about the deep, unresolved, and often contradictory relationship between Americans of different ancestries.

That question has a particular fit for Alabama for several reasons. Our state's name derives from a Native nation; the Poarch Band of Creek Indians is a sovereign Native nation within the state; Alabama recognizes a number of other tribes whose members live here today; and places such as Moundville, Oakville, and the Florence Mound remind us that indigenous history here is deep, complex, and ongoing.

We are Americans. There are more than 340 million of us, and we have shared experiences and history. We each also bring our individual experiences and personal histories. We Americans have a complicated past and as an archaeologist I see great value in learning from it: the good, the bad, and the ugly.

You probably had your first formal teaching about American Indians in the fourth grade, though you more than likely encountered images and stories at an even younger age. Your earlier experiences likely included the Thanksgiving holiday and the story of Pocahontas. Maybe you played cowboys and Indians. You surely encountered American Indian sports mascots, Land O'Lakes butter, and many other images.

Yet beyond those early lessons, stories, and visuals, many people know relatively little about the long and complex histories of American Indians. Take, for example, that broad term itself. There is no homogenous "Native American." Just like there is no one type of Alabamian, the land within our state has long been home to Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Muscogee/Creek, Yuchi, and others.

This exhibit asks what American Indian imagery, stories, and histories mean in our American life, and how they appear in our own communities today.

The answers will differ from place to place and person to person, and sharing our knowledge and experiences can lead to deeper understanding. In *Americans*, you will be asked to reconsider, with fresh eyes, four popular entry points to Native history: Thanksgiving, Pocahontas, the Trail of Tears, and the Battle of Little Bighorn. You'll then be invited to reflect on your own connections to Native names, images, and stories. Each provides an opportunity to learn a more comprehensive history and to confront common misconceptions.

This year, we Americans celebrate 250 years since the founding of the United States, which came at a great cost to American Indians. The story of this land did not begin in 1776, of course, and it certainly did not begin with Columbus. For millennia, Native peoples lived here in distinct societies and sovereign nations. They built communities, traded, formed alliances, governed themselves, cared for homelands, and, like peoples everywhere, experienced conflict and change. The *Americans* exhibit allows us to ask new questions about old stories, and examine changing attitudes toward American Indians through time. This exhibit is rooted in an intertwined history of peoples, and that history shapes our nation's ongoing debate over what it means to be an American.

In the rest of this guide, you'll read how five Alabama host communities will bring local perspectives to these national questions. These host communities will also remind us that American Indian communities are contemporary. They are our neighbors, grappling with the same issues we all do within our towns, schools, museums, landscapes, and memories. We invite you to join the exhibit at any of its stops across Alabama, to bring your own experiences to the conversation, and to think with us about what connects us, what we have inherited, and where we go from here.

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Photo: Florence Mound, by Abraham Rowe