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Indigenous People in Appalachia Today

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INDIGENOUS APPALACHIA



Indigenous People in Appalachia Today

Today's Indigenous peoples of the Americas trace their origins to the First Peoples to ever live in Native North America. The early ancestors were here for many thousands of years before Europeans claimed "discovery" of "the New World" just 500 years ago.

Early Indigenous peoples of the Appalachians had functioning agricultural, engineering, environmental, governmental, and social systems. They had developed important scientific practices centuries before Europeans arrived and, despite institution-alized challenges due to colonialism, continue to have an impact on society today. (Did you know an estimated 60% of the world's food supply originated in North America?) Today there are 574 federally recognized tribes in the U.S., each with its own distinct history, culture, and language traditions. Beyond self-identifying as having the personal (and/or familial) cultural identity of an Indigenous person, in the United States these individuals may simultaneously have tribal nation citizenship status, conferred upon them via the sovereign authority of an American Indian tribe or Alaska Native community, or tribal membership conferred by a state-recognized tribe. Though many states in Appalachia have no official tribes today, there are numerous federally recognized tribes throughout the East (see list below), state recognized tribes, and individuals whose ancestors were tribal members. This section briefly explores Indigenous cultural identities and the history of thirteen Native nations, recognizing that each is dynamic and has changed over time.

"Indigenous people have a close relationship with the land. The Seneca, Shawnee, Delaware, Cherokee, and other Tribes once lived throughout the region and thrived on the natural bounty of Appalachia. Most Tribal members were forced west after the first Treaty of Fort Stanwix (1768), the Battle of Point Pleasant (1774), and the tragedy of the Trail of Tears (1830s). However, the descendants of the Tribes that once lived here remember our history ... and some of us have returned to live in and love Appalachia.

*– Chris Chaney, Gah-Ye'Ho-Wes-Sah-Goh (Seneca-Cayuga Nation)
Lecturer WVU Native American Studies*



Here are some of the Native Nations in Appalachia today. As you read, reflect: how do the various traditions and cultures relate to your own? Do you know about neighboring Indigenous communities?

Virginia

Pamunkey Indian Tribe
Monacan Indian Nation
Chickahominy Indian Tribe
Chickahominy Indian Tribe, Eastern Division
Upper Mattaponi Tribe
Rappahannock Tribe, Inc.
Nansemond Indian Tribe

North Carolina

Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians

South Carolina

Catawba Indian Nation (Catawba Tribe of South Carolina)

New York

Cayuga Nation
Oneida Nation of New York
Onondaga Nation
Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe
Seneca Nation of Indians
Tonawanda Band of Seneca
Tuscarora Nation of New York

Mississippi

Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians



The majority of Indigenous people live outside of designated Native Nation land such as a reservation. The American Indian (AI) and Alaska Native (AN) 2020 U.S. Census population is 9.7 million or 2.9% of the total population. The AI/AN population in West Virginia amounts to 2.1% of the State pop., or 37,000 (out of a total WV pop. of approx. 1.8 million).

Keep in mind: the overall AI/AN pop. is larger than the combined populations of all the tribally enrolled citizens of the 574 sovereign Native Nations. Some people choose to list themselves as AI/AN on the Census because of an ancestral connection, but each sovereign tribal nation has its own citizenship laws; individuals can become enrolled and counted as citizens of a Native Nation but can also be disenrolled. Only about 20% of AI/AN people live on designated Native Nation land.

Justice-minded people can work collectively and individually to stay informed of Indigenous-identified concerns, issues, and initiatives, amplify the voices of Native peoples, and act as allies for civil and human rights, Indigenous rights, treaty rights, and tribal sovereignty.

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a PDF guide for Allies:



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on Native governments:

