The First Americans
A Brief History

by Carmel Underwood and Robert Underwood

Thousands of years ago, a land mass connected Asia and North America between what is now known as the Bering Strait, joining Siberia to Alaska. Animals crossed this land bridge, and hunters, probably traveling in small bands, followed them. Descendants of these hunters, the original inhabitants of the Americas, later developed into the great nations and cultures of the First Americans. Some groups followed down the coast through present day Alaska, Canada, California, and Central America, and on to the southern tip of South America. Sometime between 11,000 and 18,000 BC, both North and South America were peopled by what we in the United States now call Native Americans, or American Indians.

Eventually, many groups of First Americans tired of chasing the migrating herds of animals and settled in desirable locations throughout the American continents. They built cities, cultivated and grew crops such as beans, corn, potatoes, squash, and tobacco, and formed tribes that shared beliefs, values, and laws. In what is now the United States, diverse cultures evolved and thrived, often as a result of location, climate, and environment. Coastal people became skillful fishermen, while desert dwellers adapted to their dry environment. The natural resources of the Americas—the forests, waterways, plains, and mountains—were not only vital to the early Native Americans' existence but also greatly influenced their cultures and languages. Religious beliefs and the ceremonies that sprang from them were often derived from nature, and they played a key role in daily life.

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Before European explorers arrived, in the heart of North America, near present day St. Louis, Missouri, where the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers (both American Indian names) converge, a sophisticated urban civilization had developed with trade routes that may have reached all the way to Central America. Cahokia, as the area is known today, was the largest center of Native American urban life north of Mexico. In its zenith between 1100 and 1200 AD, this civilization contained open plazas for gatherings, agricultural fields, and 20,000 citizens living within a six-square-mile radius. The inhabitants of this first city of what is now the United States hunted, fished in the great rivers, and cultivated gardens.

The people of Cahokia were also great builders. They constructed pyramid-shaped, earthen mounds for ceremonial purposes. Sometimes, like the pyramids in ancient Egypt, these mounds were used as burial tombs for important people. These ceremonial mounds can still be found up and down the Mississippi River and throughout the Midwestern United States, often in artistic animal shapes such as turtles or snakes. Monks Mound, at the center of Cahokia, is the largest prehistoric earthen mound structure in the Americas. Nearby, the site of Woodhenge, a circular sun calendar made from evenly spaced logs, was where Cahokia's inhabitants planned their ceremonies and determined the changing of the seasons.

The seasons, the earth, the animals, and all creations of nature played, and still play, a crucial role in the lives of American Indians. Traditionally, Native Americans do not separate religion and the spirit world from their everyday lives. Sacred meaning is entwined with all aspects of daily life. Building a home, eating, sleeping, dreaming, creating art and music, and telling stories are part of the sacred life. Consequently, almost all activities are embedded with a component of ritual or prayer.

This concept is most apparent in the art of Native Americans. Although their art is self-expressive, it also reflects Native American values and connections to the spirit world. A unique feature of the art is that artwork is designed to be used in daily life. For example, "kachina dolls" created by the Anasazi cliff dwellers of the Southwest are used today by the Pueblo peoples in that region. These valuable works of art represent a supernatural spirit that visited the Pueblos on various occasions. Hundreds of unique kachina dolls are used for teaching Pueblo children to understand their world and culture.

On the great plains and in the eastern forests, bones, deer antlers, porcupine quills, hides of deer and buffalo, feathers, and even stones were used by Native Americans to produce pipes, bowls, clothing, weapons, moccasins, and spoons. These objects were carefully decorated with images of animals or forms of nature that represent spiritual matters, visions, or personal experiences. But the objects were also utilitarian. An ornately carved pipe for smoking tobacco could double as a tool when a sharpened stone was part of its construction.

(previous page) A Lokota village of about 4,000 inhabitants near Pine Ridge, South Dakota, circa 1891.

(top) The Great Serpent Mound, a quarter-mile-long prehistoric earthen mound thought to have been used as a place of worship.

(opposite top) In a Hopi bean planting ceremony, dancers impersonate kachinas (spirits) by wearing masks and headdresses.

(opposite bottom) A Hopi drawing depicting the Nakopan Myth Children engaged in foot races.

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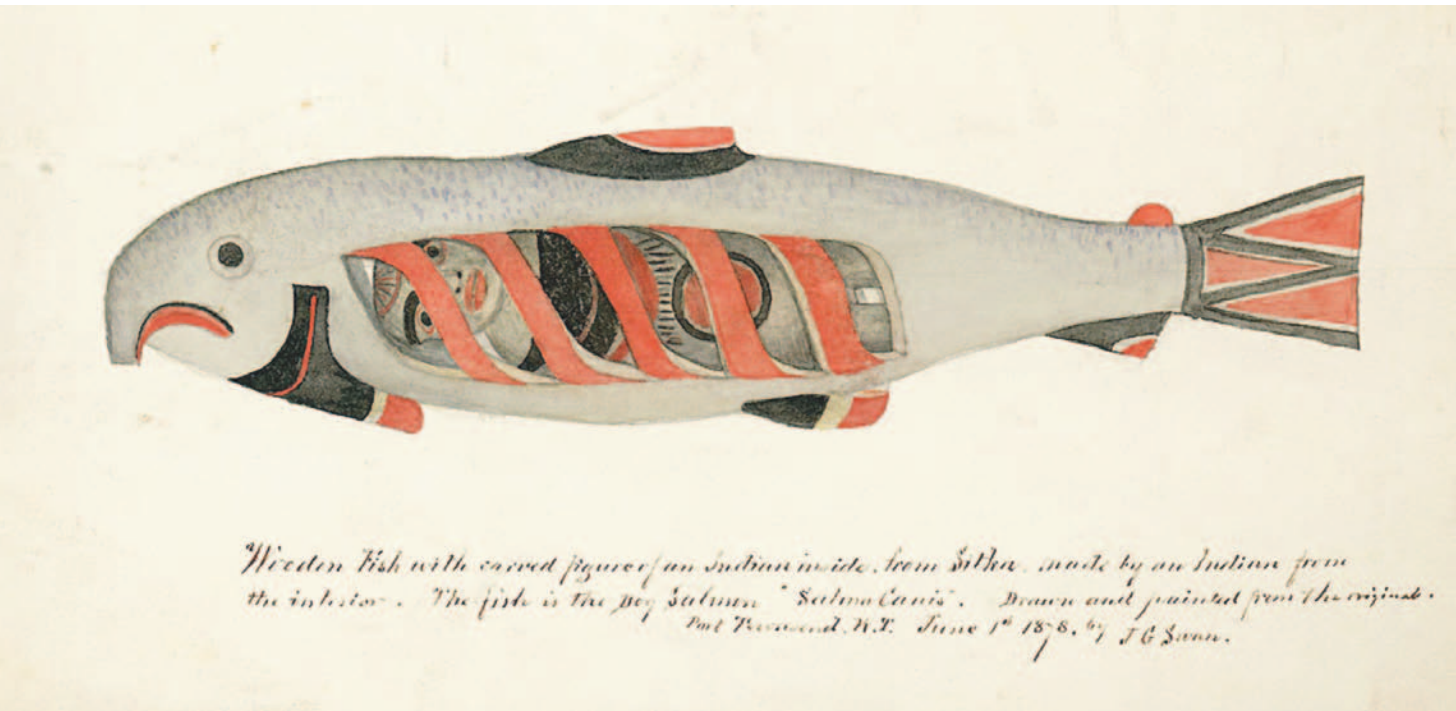
Not only their art, but their everyday activities also reflected the values of Native Americans. The practice of honoring the bones of animals they killed for sustenance was a common tradition in many Native American cultures. In the Pacific Northwest, the "First Catch" ritual honored the salmon, an important source of food, by designating a ceremonial role to the first fish caught each year and thanking it for sacrificing its life so that the people of the village could live. The "First Catch" rituals involved returning the salmon's bones to the river so that it could be reborn and live again. On the great plains, where the buffalo was considered sacred and vital to the Plains Indians' existence, these Native Americans believed that by honoring the buffalo, even in death, it would be reborn and rise again from the earth to provide them with life. Such religious beliefs and cultural traditions ultimately clashed with those of the new European inhabitants of their lands, resulting in often tragic relations between the indigenous peoples of America and the newcomers from the east.

When the explorer Christopher Columbus arrived in the Americas at the end of the fifteenth century, he was delighted with the natives he encountered. He sent messages back to Europe praising their manners and behavior. Thinking he had reached his desired destination, India, he called the people he encountered *Indios,* or Indians. For half a millennium, the name has stuck. Most Indians, however, had their own names for their tribes or groups. Many of these names con-



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tain the meaning of the word *people.* For example, the Delaware Indians who once lived in the eastern part of North America called themselves the "original or genuine people," or *Lenape* in their language. Today, most groups of American Indians such as the Cherokee, the Houma, the Lakota, and the Navajo prefer to be referred to by their tribal or community identity.

The Iroquois, a confederation of tribes called the Haudenosaunee (which means "people building a long house") lived in the northeastern part of the present United States. They lived in communities, in long buildings that were used not only as homes but also for worship and community meetings. In the sixteenth century, these tribes—the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and later the Tuscarora—created a constitution and a governing council to deal with tribal matters that affected the entire confederation.

Due to their efficient political and social organization, the Iroquois were studied and complimented by the founding fathers of the United States. Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams invited the Iroquois chiefs to attend the meetings that led to the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Eventually some of the Iroquois confederation's original laws—designed to serve, protect, and resolve disputes within the entire confederation, while allowing each individual tribe to make local decisions—would prove to be models for the U.S. Constitution.

(opposite page, top) Painting of two men fishing for salmon by Henry Wood Elliot (1846–1930), one of the first American artists to work in Alaska.

(opposite page, bottom) Wood carving of a salmon with a man inside made by an Alaska Native, drawn and painted from the original by James G. Swan.

(below) This print from a 1494 letter by Christopher Columbus contains what may be the first illustration of the New World.

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The arrival of Europeans and their eventual conquest of all of North America was ultimately devastating for Native Americans. The newcomers exposed them to diseases, such as smallpox and measles, to which they had no immunity. Thousands of Native Americans perished when epidemics surged through their communities. Eventually, the Iroquois and other groups were forced to move from their original lands in the east, either for reasons of survival or because they were displaced by government policies. As one group was pushed west, it came into conflict with other groups, who in turn were pushed farther west to the Mississippi River and beyond. Various tribes got caught up in the wars with the French and the English, and in the American Revolution. No matter which side they took, they eventually lost more and more territory and rights. Treaties were written and territories were promised to Native Americans, but over and over again, lands that they had once inhabited, hunted on, and farmed were taken away. Eventually, the U.S. government relocated most Indians onto reservations—contained areas—where they were dependent on the government for their livelihood.

Today, the majority of American Indians, possibly 80 percent, live in urban environments, not on reservations. America's first people take part in every aspect of society in the United States. Those who remain on reservations continue to practice their native culture and traditions, as do many of the "urbanized" American Indians who have also, in many ways, assimilated into mainstream American culture. With the opening of the new National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC, the achievements, art, beliefs, and values of Native Americans can now be more fully shared and appreciated by the world.

Glossary

confederation *n.* a joining together of several groups of people into an alliance for a common purpose

displace *v.* force someone, or a group of people, to move to and live in another location

kachina doll *n.* a carved, wooden doll that represents a spirit in the Pueblo Indian religion

moccasins *n.* flat, soft-leather shoes made and worn by Native Americans

reservation *n.* a separate area of public land for Native Americans to live on

ritual *n.* a procedure that is regularly followed during a ceremony or special event to highlight its importance

(above) This engraving depicts the arrival in North America of ships from England in 1585. These ships carried men and women sent to establish an English colony.

(right) Painting of an Indian council, organized to deal with governing issues. When the Cherokees arrived in Oklahoma, they did not accept the established Indian councils, instead advocating for Cherokee autonomy.

© 2004 Maxwell MacKenzieNational Museum of the American Indian

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN

On September 21, 2004, the Smithsonian Institution's newest museum, the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), located on the National Mall in Washington, DC, opened its doors to the public. According to its mission statement, this museum is "dedicated to the preservation, study and exhibition of the life, language, literature, history and arts of the Native Peoples of the Western Hemisphere." The NMAI's unique architectural design and comprehensive collection attract a wide range of visitors curious about Native American history and culture.

In the early 1990s, museum curators and representatives of Native American nations throughout the United States began a dialogue on how the museum could best present an accurate picture of the indigenous peoples of America. Their aim was to reach beyond the stereotypes and falsely held opinions of Native American culture still prevalent today by creating an institution that "illuminate[s] how Native Americans perceive their place—spiritually, historically, and physically—in the universe."

From these talks emerged the concept of creating a "living" museum that is in harmony with nature and reflects the influence of nature on Native American culture. In keeping with this idea, the design of the museum, prepared by a collaborative architectural team of Native Americans and others, was to include rich natural materials, colors, forms, imagery, and symbols. The final result is a state-of the-art edifice featuring details and patterns that represent the Native universe and the influences of the natural world that informed these cultures.

The choice of NMAI's location, on a body of land between two rivers, the Potomac and the Anacostia, highlights the important role rivers played in early Native Americans' existence. The plaza that precedes the main entrance is designed to reflect the pattern of the constellations that appeared in the night sky on November 28, 1989, the day federal legislation for the creation of the museum was introduced. The exterior of the museum is a spectacular design composed of Kasota stone, a limestone from Minnesota, in the distinctive wind-sculpted shapes and curves of a Southwestern mesa.

A "Welcome Wall" at the entrance of the museum greets guests in hundreds of Native American languages. At the request of the Elders, leaders and spokespeople of Native American nations, a large central gathering place that represents the heart of Native activities was included in the plan; this space provides a performance area that rises 120 feet to a central dome. Named the Potomac, a local Native American word meaning "where the goods are brought

(above) North side of the National Museum of the American Indian.

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Websites of Interest

American Indian Resource Directory
http://www.indians.org/Resource/natlit/natlit.html

The American Indian Resource Directory features links to Native American literature sites as well as a link to the very informative site, *History and Discussion of Native American Languages,* where you can learn about how American Indians are working to preserve their languages and heritage.

Illinois Historic Preservation Society
http://www.state.il.us/hpa/Mounds.htm

This website provides information about the historic Cahokia Mounds, the mound culture, and the prehistoric peoples who once inhabited the area. Pictures of the archeological remains and information about the Interpretive Center are also provided.

Language Policy – Endangered Languages
http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/JWCRAWFORD/brj.htm

James Crawford's article "Endangered Native American Languages: What Is to Be Done and Why?" is a comprehensive and well-documented examination of the loss of Native American languages, what is being done to stem the loss, and why we should be concerned.

National Museum of the American Indian
http://www.nmai.si.edu

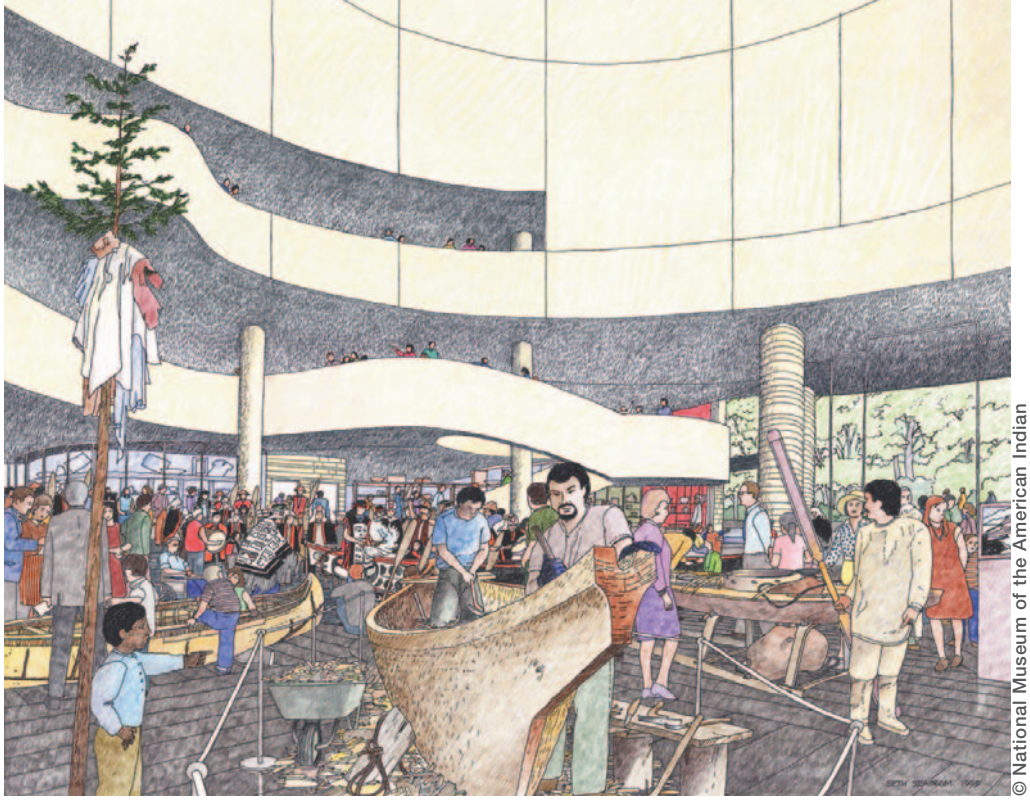
For descriptions of museum exhibits, teaching materials, articles on the construction and grand opening of the museum, and more, visit this Smithsonian website.

Native American Home Pages – Education
http://www.nativeculture.com/lisamitten/education.html

This site has numerous links to information on tribal colleges, native studies programs, and Indian education. Click on "General Indian Education Resources" to find information you could use in your classroom, such as the material from "American Indians and the Natural World."

Teaching Indigenous Languages Home Page
http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/TIL.html

For descriptions of museum exhibits, teaching materials, articles on the construction and grand opening of the museum, and more, visit this Smithsonian website.



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in," this gathering place encourages visitors to acknowledge the significance of the sun, moon, and heavens in the life of Native Americans.

Inside, the museum contains a main theater that evokes a forest clearing at night, complete with bright stars for storytelling—the oral tradition of many Native American people through which cultural customs, values, and history are communicated to future generations. Audiences enjoy the storytellers, dancers, film festivals, and many other activities that illuminate the rich Native American cultural traditions.

In the Lelawi Theater, a multimedia presentation projected on a 40-foot dome transports visitors from the Andes mountain range in South America, through the forests and deserts of Central America and the United States, to the far reaches of the Arctic. Through this presentation, visitors learn about many Native American cultures that inhabited South, Central, and North America, including the Maya, Navaho, Cree, Cheyenne, and Inuit tribes.

The museum's three exhibition galleries contain thousands of artifacts, collected over a 54-year period. About 70 percent of the collection is from North America (roughly 67 percent from the United States and 3 percent from Canada), and about 30 percent is from Central and South America. Notable items in this comprehensive collection include an ancient Mayan vase from A.D. 55–85, baskets and dolls from California tribes, a Blackfeet hide shirt with quill work from Montana, and a Tlingit canoe model from early 19th Century Alaska.

A visitor to the National Museum of the American Indian will discover that this institution honors the myriad indigenous peoples that have inhabited the Americas while it informs and welcomes visitors into the rich and varied world of Native American cultures.

© National Museum of the American Indian

(above) The Potomac, the symbolic center of the museum, is used for many programs, such as the demonstration of Native boat building shown here.

(right) The 1801 Thomas Jefferson Peace Medal was carried, in three different sizes, by the Lewis and Clark Expedition to present to Indians along the route as a sign of peace and friendship.

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CHEROKEE PHŒNIX,

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Preserving Native Cultures and Languages

In a small town in Oklahoma, teachers of children of the Cherokee Nation address their students by their Cherokee names and teach them about the world in the Cherokee language. At one time, Native American education in native language was prohibited, but today Cherokee children are studying the culture and language that their grandparents, and their ancestors before them, knew. Throughout the United States, there is a movement to preserve the cultures and languages of American Indians. This movement is not meant to replace the use of the English language but to encourage the learning of and respect for Native Americans' heritage and their contributions to American society.

The Cherokee Indians, originally inhabitants of America's southeastern states, were forced to leave their homeland and move to the territory of Oklahoma in the late 1830s. Accompanied by U.S. Army escorts, they traveled the "Trail of Tears" from the east coast to the region now known as the state of Oklahoma. Many of the Cherokee people died on the long and cruel march to the designated "Indian Territory." The ancestors of those who survived and are still living on reservations today are now attempting to keep their culture alive in the tradition of Sequoyah, a half-Cherokee who, in 1823, invented a system for writing the Cherokee language. Sequoyah's innovative system—using symbols for syllables—allowed many Cherokees to learn to read and write in their native tongue. Newspapers were eventually printed in the Cherokee language. Today Sequoyah's writing system is still used in schools that are actively preserving the Cherokee language.

In the 19th century, the U.S. government established a policy that required areas of land to be designated as reservations for Native Americans to inhabit. Later this policy was modified to force the removal of children from their parents, stipulating that the children be educated in boarding schools, away from parental and cultural influences. In these boarding schools, Native American children were not allowed to speak their native language, could not practice their religious beliefs, and were forced to imitate the dominant European-American culture. The ultimate intention of this policy was to extinguish the Native Americans' culture by eradicating their beliefs, traditions, languages, and religions in a single generation—in effect, to erase the Native Americans' traditional culture. This plan proved to be a failure. American Indian cultures and languages, although fragile, broken, and endangered, continue to survive to this day.

The loss of languages is a universal problem. Today there may be as many as 6,000 languages spoken in the world, but that number could possibly shrink by half as an older generation passes away and a younger one, raised on television, radio, the Internet, and mass marketing, takes over. When Spanish conquerors arrived in California in the early 16th Century, over 100 indigenous languages were spoken there, many of them as different from each other as English is from Chinese. Today the number of languages and the cultures they reflect have disappeared by half. In the United States today, nearly 200 Native American languages still exist. Almost 90 percent of them are spoken by an aging generation that has not passed on its linguistic heritage to the younger generation. The result: rich Native American traditions and customs are gradually disappearing or dying out. And because these native languages are not being preserved, they are at risk of extinction.

But a welcome movement is occurring in the Native American community, one that promotes appreciation and preservation of indigenous cultures and their languages. A generation of writers—among them Linda Hogan, whose essay "For Life's Sake" is featured in this issue of Forum—is educating a new generation of readers while simultaneously preserving, giving dignity to, and enhancing their ancestors' cultures. Hogan, for example, writes in English, and her

(top) Nameplate of the first newspaper to use the Cherokee alphabet. Its first issue was published February 21, 1828.

(above) This statue of Sequoyah stands in Statuary Hall in the U.S. Capitol. Sequoyah developed a table of symbols for the 86 sounds in the Cherokee language. This alphabet has been in use since 1823. **Photo: Courtesy of The Office of the Architect, U.S. Capitol**

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(above) The Cherokee alphabet.

work serves as a guide to the heritage of her Chickasaw ancestors who, like the Cherokee and other Indian nations, were forced on the "Trail of Tears" into Oklahoma in the 19th century. Hogan's works and those of many other Native American writers and artists are taught in universities across America. In the tradition of her elders, Hogan often writes of the natural and spiritual world, giving breath and life to a world that enriches her readers.

Preservation of Native cultures is also being aided by a developing system of Tribal Colleges and Universities across the United States. At present there are 34 such schools stretching from the west coast of California and Washington to the Midwestern and Southwestern United States. These schools not only provide a quality education but also feature curricula that impart valuable tribal histories, languages, and customs to students who otherwise might not have an opportunity to learn about their native heritage.

The leaders of these colleges and universities, which are usually located on or near a reservation, work with tribal elders to develop and refine their curriculum. Courses in traditional art and literature are created to preserve, give current meaning to, and teach appreciation for the ancient cultural heritage of the First Americans. Other courses are designed to meet the present needs of a particular reservation such as preserving the environment, securing clean air and water, and satisfying specific agricultural or ranching needs. Additional courses have been developed to assist Native American students in preparing for their future employment. For example, Sitting Bull College in North Dakota and the University of South Dakota are collaborating to create the first Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree program for Native Americans in the United States. Surveys show that tribal institutions of higher learning are proving to be very successful and that Native American students who attend a tribal college or university are far more likely to finish their college education than those who enter schools outside their reservations.

Stabilizing, reviving, and maintaining the cultures and languages of people who have inhabited, cherished, and enriched the earth is of value to us all. Efforts by many American Indians are progressing toward this goal. With dedication and hope, Native Americans will continue their efforts to honor and preserve the rich cultural and linguistic heritage of their ancestors.

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