

# Honoring Indigenous and Native American Service Members this Indian Heritage Month

## Indigenous Peoples: Guardians of the Land

Indigenous peoples have been an integral part of global history for millennia, existing long before recorded time. With diverse cultures, languages, and traditions, they have thrived across the globe. In what is now the United States, indigenous peoples were the first settlers, cultivating deep connections with the land and establishing rich civilizations. Their legacy spans thousands of years, embodying resilience, wisdom, and a profound respect for the natural world.

## Encounter with Colonial Settlers

The arrival of colonial settlers marked a significant turning point in the history of pre-American indigenous peoples. The cultural landscape shifted as European explorers and settlers encountered indigenous communities, leading to complex interactions and profound changes. These encounters brought both opportunities and challenges, shaping the cultural fabric of indigenous societies and laying the groundwork for future dynamics within the United States.

## From Natives to Citizens

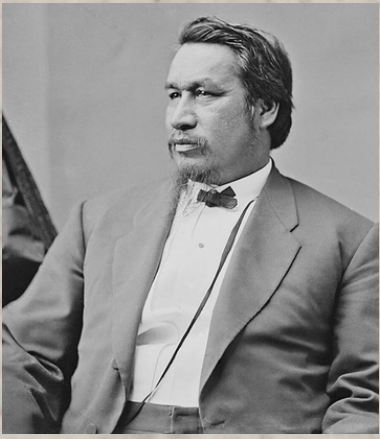
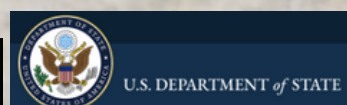
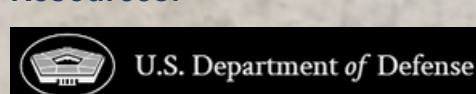
As the United States emerged from the era of colonialism, indigenous peoples underwent a profound transition, transitioning from sovereign entities to citizens of a new nation. This transformation, marked by significant shifts in governance and society, presented indigenous communities with complex obstacles and potential. Their journey towards American citizenship was marked by a series of trials, including displacement, treaty negotiations fraught with complexities, and conflicts that tested allegiances. Notably, the War of 1812 served as a pivotal moment, illustrating indigenous peoples' commitment and loyalty to the developing United States.

## Native Americans in the Armed Forces

From the inception of the nation, Native Americans have etched their legacy in the records of the United States Armed Forces with a steadfast resolve unmatched by any other. Across the generations, they have answered the call to duty with unwavering dedication, spanning generations and continents. According to the National Indian Council on Aging Inc., Native Americans serve in the United States Armed Forces at five times the national average, a testament to their unwavering commitment. Amidst the intensity of conflict, Native and Indigenous men and women alike have left indelible marks upon the pages of history, their valor resounding from the Korean War to the present-day deployments. We stand in reverence of their sacrifices.

The NJ Department of Military and Veteran Affairs pays homage to the indomitable spirit of native and indigenous peoples, we honor not just their valor on the battlefield, but their resilience in the face of adversity, their unwavering commitment to service, and their enduring legacy in shaping the destiny of our nation.

## Resources:



**General Ely S. Parker**, who acted as secretary to General Ulysses S. Grant during the Civil War, later made history as the inaugural Native American to serve as Commissioner of Indian Affairs. | Image courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration



**Grace Francis Thorpe**, a descendant of Potawatomi, Kickapoo, and Menominee ancestry, and directly linked to Sac and Fox Chief Black Hawk, enlisted in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps in 1943. Rising to the rank of corporal, she served as a recruiter before embarking on overseas duty, where she earned the esteemed Bronze Star. Following her return to the United States, she deepened her involvement in Native American advocacy, dedicating herself to the cause within the National Congress of American Indians. In 1971, she co-founded the National Indian Women's Action Corps, a pivotal organization aimed at empowering Indigenous families and women, ensuring their strength and resilience endure through generations.



**Harvey Pratt**, a Vietnam War veteran, is an esteemed Native American artist known for his remarkable contributions to forensic art and sculpture. Serving during the Vietnam War, Pratt's valor earned him several medals and recognitions for his bravery and service. He gained widespread recognition for his poignant memorial design honoring Native American veterans, which was unveiled in 2018 outside of the **National Museum of the American Indian** in Washington, D.C. This memorial serves as a powerful symbol of their sacrifices and contributions to the nation's military history.



**Marcella Lebeau**, hailing from the Sioux Tribe in South Dakota, courageously served as an Army nurse during World War II, tending to the initial wave of casualties from the beaches of Normandy. Her exceptional dedication extended throughout the battles in Northern Europe, Ardennes, and Rhineland, earning her three service stars. Remarkably, she stands as the sole Native American woman bestowed with France's highest civilian honor in recognition of her invaluable service as an Army nurse during World War II. | Image Courtesy of VA News



**Master Sergeant Woodrow Wilson Keeble**, a proud member of the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate tribe in South Dakota, bravely served in both World War II and the Korean War. His exceptional valor during the Korean War earned him the prestigious Medal of Honor. Keeble's legacy continues to inspire, symbolizing the bravery of Native American service members, while his story serves as a beacon of courage for future generations. | Image provided by Defense.gov



**Mitchelene BigMan**, a member of the Apsáalooke Nation from the Montana Crow Reservation, served in the U.S. Army for 22 years, deploying twice to Iraq. Following her military service, she founded the **Native American Women Warriors (NAWW)**, the first all-Native American Women Color Guard. BigMan continues to advocate for Native American women veterans, touring with NAWW and serving on the advisory committee for the Smithsonian National Native American Veterans Memorial.