By: The Workforce Engagement Unit



Every November, we celebrate **National Native American Heritage Month**, a time to honor the rich cultures, traditions, histories, and enduring contributions of Native Americans, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians.

The observance began in 1916 as American Indian Day. In 1975, President Gerald Ford expanded the recognition to Native American Awareness Week, and in 1990, President George H. W. Bush signed legislation designating the entire month of November as National American Indian Heritage Month, now known as National Native American Heritage Month.

Native American history is deeply woven into the story of the United States. Long before European settlement, Indigenous peoples built thriving communities, established trade networks, developed agricultural innovations, and created systems of governance that continue to influence society today.

While Native American communities have contributed immensely to our nation, they have also endured tremendous hardships. Between 1830 and 1850, thousands of Native Americans were forcibly removed from their ancestral homelands under the Indian Removal Act. The forced migration of tribes from Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, and North Carolina became known as the **Trail of Tears**, a painful chapter in American history that can still be explored through preserved routes and historical sites today.

Despite these challenges, Native American nations have preserved their cultures, traditions, and languages. Today, approximately **6.8 million people identify as American Indian or Alaska Native**, representing about 2% of the U.S. population. There are **574 federally recognized tribes** in the United States, each with its own unique heritage, traditions, and contributions. The **Cherokee Nation** is the largest federally recognized tribal nation in the country.

Did You Know?

• More than **175 Indigenous languages** are still spoken in the United States today.

• Native Americans developed sign language systems that helped facilitate communication and trade among tribes speaking different languages.

• Many state names, including **Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, Massachusetts, and Oklahoma**, are derived from Native American languages.

• Indigenous farmers cultivated crops such as **corn, pumpkins, squash, beans, avocados, tomatoes, peppers, and wild rice** long before European settlement.

• **Maple syrup** was first produced and harvested by Indigenous peoples of North America.

• **Canoeing** and **lacrosse** originated with Native American communities. Lacrosse began as a traditional game played for recreation, training, and spiritual purposes.

• Indigenous peoples were among the first known cultures in the Americas to use natural rubber.

• Native Americans shared agricultural, environmental, and medicinal knowledge that continues to influence modern farming and healthcare practices.

As we observe National Native American Heritage Month, let us take time to learn about the diverse cultures, histories, achievements, and ongoing contributions of Native peoples. Their resilience, innovation, and traditions continue to enrich our communities and shape our nation.