



“In fourteen-hundred ninety-two
Columbus sailed the ocean blue.”

And so begins the opening stanza of a poem many older Americans grew up reciting as children. The poem promoted a white-washed history of America that ignored the darker side of Columbus' legacy. A legacy that included the kidnapping, torture, and eventual genocide of the Arawak people. That legacy set the stage for the Atlantic Slave Trade that would transport millions of enslaved Africans to the already blood-soaked shores of the New World.

Columbus Day was first celebrated in the US on October 12, 1792. Now, 228 years later, Virginia Governor, Ralph Northam, has issued a proclamation declaring the day, Indigenous Peoples' Day. It is a small step toward piercing the veil of America's hidden history. At the heart of this history lies land, the resources it contains, the wealth it produces, and the power that land ownership conveys.

When we hear the term, “land rush,” the Oklahoma rush of 1889 may be the first thing to come to mind, but the insatiable hunger for land by White colonizers, unimpeded by ethics, began long before. In 1776, as the ink was drying on the Declaration of Independence, the race for land was already on. Since then, approximately 1.5 billion acres has been taken from native peoples, much of it by hook or crook.

Governor Northam Proclaims Indigenous Peoples' Day in Virginia

For the first time in the Commonwealth, Monday, October 12 will honor the history and culture of Virginia's native people

RICHMOND—Governor Ralph Northam today declared Monday, October 12, 2020 Indigenous Peoples' Day in the Commonwealth of Virginia, the first such [proclamation](#) in Virginia history.

Governor Northam issued the following statement and shared a [video message](#) with Virginians for Indigenous Peoples' Day.

“For the first time in Virginia history, we are recognizing Indigenous Peoples' Day—this year on Monday, October 12. As a country and as a Commonwealth, we have too often failed to live up to our commitments with those who were the first stewards of the lands we now call Virginia—and they have suffered historic injustices as a result.

“Indigenous Peoples' Day celebrates the resilience of our tribal communities and promotes reconciliation, healing, and continued friendship with Virginia's Indian tribes. In making this proclamation, we pay tribute to the culture, history, and many contributions of Virginia Indians and recommit to cultivating strong government-to-government partnerships that are grounded in mutual trust and respect.

“This represents an important step forward in our work to build an inclusive Commonwealth, and I hope all Virginians will join me in honoring Virginia's native people.”

Virginia is home to 11 state-recognized Indian tribes, which include the Cheroenhaka (Nottoway) Indian Tribe, Chickahominy Indian Tribe, Chickahominy Indians Eastern Division, Mattaponi Indian Tribe, Monacan Indian Nation, Nansemond Indian Tribe, Nottoway Indian Tribe of Virginia, Pamunkey Indian Tribe, Patowomeck Indian Tribe of Virginia, Rappahannock Tribe, and the Upper Mattaponi Indian Tribe. Seven of these tribes are federally recognized.

This wasn't just the work of shady land speculators, drafting worthless treaties. It was a systemic dispossession and destruction of a people, aided and abetted by the federal government.

From Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Act of 1830 and the Black Hawk War of 1832, to the infamous Trail of Tears, which spanned 20 years, dispossessing 60,000 native people, the foundation of the myth of American exceptionalism is built on the blood and bones of indigenous people. The legacy of incursion on native peoples' culture continues today with the 2016 stand-off in North Dakota between the Water Protectors of Standing Rock and Keystone XL Pipeline.



All of it, for land.

Land is wealth. Land is power. Land is liberation. It's the place we call home and the source of our sustenance. The land shapes us and in the context of social hierarchies, land access and ownership determines who has agency and who doesn't. We must honor the land and the people who occupied it first. If a just society is what we seek, we must have a true accounting of history. We must teach truth to power.

In Virginia, we honor the Rappahannock Tribe, the Upper Mattaponi Tribe, the Monican Nation, the Cheroenhaka (Nottoway) Tribe, the Nansemond Tribe, the Chickahominy Indians Eastern Division, The Chickahominy Indian Tribe, the Mattaponi Indian Tribe, the Virginia Nottoway Indian Tribe, the Virginia Patowomeck Indian Tribe, and the Pamunkey Indian Tribe.

Land is liberation. Let us commit to teach this truth.