

**Indigenous Peoples' Day and the
History of Indigenous Peoples in Santa Clara County**

By

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Indigenous Peoples' Day has emerged as one of the most significant cultural, educational, and civic observances in the United States, serving as both a corrective to the traditional narrative of Columbus Day and as a recognition of the enduring presence, resilience, and sovereignty of Native peoples. Its origins are rooted in decades of advocacy by Indigenous leaders and scholars seeking to challenge celebratory accounts of European colonization and to highlight the histories, cultures, and contributions of Indigenous communities that existed long before European arrival. The observance provides an opportunity to confront historical injustices, promote accurate education, and foster public understanding of Native histories. Indigenous Peoples' Day has gradually gained recognition at municipal, state, and federal levels, reflecting a broader social movement to honor Native voices and perspectives and to acknowledge the injustices perpetrated against Indigenous communities through colonization, forced assimilation, land theft, and systemic marginalization.

The first formal advocacy for Indigenous Peoples' Day occurred at the United Nations in 1977, when representatives from Indigenous nations in the Americas called for recognition of October 12 as a day to honor Indigenous peoples rather than celebrate Columbus. This proposal sought to correct dominant narratives that framed Columbus as a hero while ignoring the catastrophic impact European colonization had on Indigenous populations, including displacement, enslavement, cultural suppression, and widespread mortality due to introduced diseases. The advocacy at the United Nations, combined with grassroots movements in the United States, laid the groundwork for local, state, and national recognition of Indigenous Peoples' Day. These efforts were part of a broader push by Indigenous activists to reclaim public memory, assert sovereignty, and challenge historical erasure.

The City of Berkeley, California, became the first government entity in the United States to officially adopt Indigenous Peoples' Day in 1992, coinciding with the 500th anniversary of Columbus's arrival in the Americas. Berkeley's proclamation was deliberately symbolic, rejecting the celebration of Columbus as a heroic figure and centering Indigenous histories, cultures, and perspectives. The city collaborated closely with Native leaders to integrate educational programming, cultural events, and curriculum

reforms emphasizing historical truth, social justice, and Indigenous survival. This precedent encouraged other cities, counties, and educational institutions to adopt Indigenous Peoples' Day and provided a model for incorporating local Indigenous histories into public commemorations. Over time, the movement expanded, and California became a leader in recognizing Indigenous Peoples' Day, with many cities and counties including San Francisco, Los Angeles, Santa Cruz, and Santa Clara County officially celebrating the observance and collaborating with tribal communities to ensure meaningful engagement.

The state of California, while not designating Indigenous Peoples' Day as a full state holiday with mandated closures, has recognized it through annual gubernatorial proclamations. Governor Gavin Newsom has signed proclamations highlighting the histories, contributions, and resilience of Indigenous communities, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging California's historic role in violence and land dispossession, and promoting education, cultural programming, and tribal partnerships. These proclamations underscore the diversity of California tribes, including over a hundred federally recognized tribes and numerous non-federally recognized communities with continuous historical presence, and affirm the state's commitment to honoring their contributions. The federal government took a historic step in 2021 when President Joe Biden issued the first presidential proclamation recognizing Indigenous Peoples' Day. While Columbus Day remains a federal holiday, the presidential acknowledgment elevates Indigenous Peoples' Day to national prominence and encourages federal agencies, museums, educational institutions, and cultural organizations to center Indigenous voices and histories in programming, scholarship, and public commemoration.

In Santa Clara County, Indigenous Peoples' Day carries profound historical and cultural significance. The county lies on the ancestral lands of the Tamien (Tamyen) Ohlone, the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band, and other related Ohlone-speaking peoples who inhabited the Santa Clara Valley, surrounding hills, and nearby coastal regions for thousands of years prior to European contact. Archaeological evidence including shell mounds, bedrock mortars, ceremonial sites, and village remnants demonstrates a sophisticated Indigenous presence that managed natural resources, maintained social networks, and developed spiritual and cultural systems intricately tied to the land. The Tamien and Amah Mutsun engaged in seasonal migrations, fishing, hunting, gathering, and controlled burns to sustain biodiversity, enhance agricultural productivity, and maintain ecological balance. Their villages, often located near creeks, rivers, and marshes, were interconnected through kinship, trade, and ceremonial exchange, forming complex political, social, and economic networks across the Bay Area.

The Amah Mutsun Tribal Band, historically referred to in Spanish mission documents as part of the Mission San Juan Bautista and Mission Santa Cruz labor force, is a contemporary manifestation of these ancestral communities. The Amah Mutsun people's territory historically encompassed southern Santa Clara County, southern Santa Cruz County, and parts of San Benito County, including key valleys, mountains, and coastal regions. They maintained intricate knowledge of the landscape, including plant ecology, water systems, wildlife behavior, and seasonal cycles. Cultural practices, ceremonies, and oral histories emphasized the spiritual interconnectedness of humans, animals, and the environment, forming the basis of governance, social order, and education within tribal communities. The Amah Mutsun continues to honor these ancestral practices through ceremonial events, cultural education, and environmental stewardship initiatives that link contemporary conservation projects to millennia-old traditions of sustainable land use.

Spanish colonization beginning in the late 1700s severely disrupted the social, cultural, and political structures of Indigenous peoples in Santa Clara County. Mission Santa Clara de Asís, established in 1777, became a primary center of assimilation and forced labor, drawing Indigenous peoples from multiple Ohlone groups, including the Tamien and Amah Mutsun. Native peoples were compelled into mission life through coercion and the collapse of local food sources due to Spanish livestock and agriculture. At the missions, Indigenous individuals endured strict control over daily life, the suppression of native languages and spiritual practices, separation of families, and exposure to European diseases that caused severe population decline. The missions not only disrupted cultural continuity but also redefined land use, transforming centuries of Indigenous stewardship into Spanish agricultural production and urban planning. Following Mexican secularization in the 1830s, mission lands were redistributed as ranchos, which often excluded Indigenous peoples, leaving them landless and dependent on ranch labor for subsistence. The American period beginning in 1848 compounded these disruptions, introducing new legal systems, property laws, and urban development patterns that further marginalized Indigenous communities while erasing their physical and cultural presence from public records and landscapes.

Despite these adversities, Indigenous peoples in Santa Clara County preserved their heritage through family networks, oral history, and subtle cultural practices that survived through periods of colonization, missionization, and American expansion. The Amah Mutsun Tribal Band, alongside the Tamien and Muwekma Ohlone, maintained identity across generations despite the absence of federal recognition for much of the twentieth century. These communities continued to practice ceremonies, maintain knowledge of sacred sites, and cultivate connections to the land that would later inform cultural revitalization efforts. Archaeological discoveries in the region, including remnants of

villages, burial grounds, and ceremonial sites, have repeatedly demonstrated the deep-rooted presence of these Indigenous peoples and their ongoing cultural significance. Sites such as the Tamien village area, shell mounds along Coyote Creek, and coastal terraces reveal a continuous occupation that spans thousands of years and illustrate the vital role of the Amah Mutsun and Tamien in shaping the region's ecological and cultural landscape.

In the contemporary era, the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band has taken an active leadership role in cultural and environmental revitalization within Santa Clara County and surrounding regions. The tribe oversees the Amah Mutsun Land Trust, which manages ancestral lands for restoration, conservation, and educational purposes. Collaborative projects include creek restoration, oak woodland management, wetland protection, and ecological monitoring, integrating traditional ecological knowledge with modern scientific approaches. The tribe has revitalized cultural practices, including language reconstruction, ceremonial events, and community education programs, ensuring that younger generations maintain connections to their heritage. These programs often take place in collaboration with universities, museums, cultural institutions, and public schools, promoting awareness of local Indigenous history and fostering respect for tribal sovereignty. The Amah Mutsun also engages in advocacy around land protection, historic preservation, and environmental justice, emphasizing the spiritual and cultural significance of the landscape and challenging continued threats from development and climate change.

Santa Clara County has formally recognized Indigenous Peoples' Day through resolutions and proclamations passed by the Board of Supervisors, highlighting the contributions and enduring presence of local Indigenous communities, including the Amah Mutsun. These proclamations encourage schools, libraries, cultural organizations, and county departments to implement programming that reflects Indigenous perspectives and to engage with tribal leaders in planning events. Public celebrations include Ohlone and Amah Mutsun dances, storytelling, basketry and craft exhibitions, educational workshops, lectures on tribal history, and interactive programs demonstrating traditional land stewardship practices. Universities, including San Jose State University, have incorporated Indigenous Peoples' Day into academic and cultural programming, providing students and community members with opportunities to gain experience about the ancient and contemporary significance of Indigenous communities in the region. Land acknowledgment practices have also become widespread, appearing in public meetings, cultural events, and institutional ceremonies, reinforcing recognition of ancestral territories and Indigenous sovereignty.

The integration of Amah Mutsun history into Santa Clara County's cultural and educational landscape has broader implications for public memory, civic engagement, and social justice. Recognizing Indigenous Peoples' Day, honoring sacred sites, and teaching accurate histories of local Indigenous nations challenges the traditional erasure of Native presence and confronts the legacy of colonization, missionization, and dispossession. Through these initiatives, Indigenous perspectives are centered in discussions of environmental stewardship, urban development, historical interpretation, and cultural programming. The acknowledgment of the Amah Mutsun and other Ohlone peoples reinforces that the region's history did not begin with European settlement or Silicon Valley development but extends thousands of years into the past, shaped by Indigenous governance, land management, and spiritual practices. Indigenous Peoples' Day thus functions not only as a symbolic observance but as a catalyst for deeper civic understanding, historical reckoning, and community collaboration with Native leaders.

The historical and contemporary experiences of the Amah Mutsun and other Ohlone peoples exemplify the resilience, adaptation, and ongoing contributions of Indigenous communities in Santa Clara County. From pre-contact ecological stewardship to survival through missionization, land dispossession, and cultural suppression, and now through revitalization, education, and environmental leadership, Indigenous peoples have continuously shaped and enriched the region. Observances such as Indigenous Peoples' Day provide a public platform to celebrate this resilience, educate residents, and reinforce the living presence of Native communities in shaping local history, culture, and policy. In doing so, Santa Clara County participates in a broader national movement to restore historical accuracy, honor tribal sovereignty, and support Indigenous self-determination while educating future generations about the integral role of Native peoples in the region's past, present, and future.