

**Native American Day: Origins, Proclamations, California and
Santa Clara County Impact**

By

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Native American Day in California stands as one of the most significant recognitions of Indigenous presence, heritage, and endurance in the state that today contains the largest Native American population in the United States. Unlike the federal calendar, which does not include an official national holiday dedicated solely to Indigenous peoples (although many states and cities now observe Indigenous Peoples' Day on the second Monday in October), California forged its own distinct recognition through legislative action, executive proclamations, and a decades-long movement led by tribal nations, community cultural advocates, educators, and state lawmakers. The origins of Native American Day as celebrated in California reveal a deep history of political negotiation, public re-education, and acknowledgment of the state's Indigenous tribes over one hundred sovereign nations whose histories predate the formation of the state by thousands of years. The holiday, observed annually on the fourth Friday of September, serves as a crucial corrective to centuries in which California's Indigenous communities were marginalized, legislatively attacked, and systematically oppressed through policies of displacement, missionization, land seizure, and genocide. To understand Native American Day fully, one must consider not only the historical evolution of the holiday but also its legal formation, the proclamations that formalized it, and its effect on civic life in regions such as Santa Clara County, where the Ohlone people, specifically the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band, the Tamien Nation, and Muwekma Ohlone Tribe continue to shape the cultural and educational landscape.

The earliest efforts to establish a day honoring Native peoples in California date to the mid-twentieth century, though Indigenous advocacy had long preceded it. In 1939, Governor Culbert Olson issued what is frequently considered one of the earliest state-level acknowledgments of Native presence, though not yet in the form of a formal holiday. For decades, California schools taught deeply distorted narratives about the missions, the Spanish conquest, and the Gold Rush, frequently depicting Indigenous Californians as passive figures or obstacles to the expansion of the state. It was not until the civil rights era when Indigenous activism intensified nationwide; that the idea of a Native American heritage observance gained political traction. In the 1960s and 1970s, tribes and Native organizations in both northern and southern California began formally petitioning

governors and state legislators to create a recognition day that would counterbalance the persistent glorification of settler colonial narratives. The occupation of Alcatraz in 1969 by the Indians of All Tribes, the rise of the American Indian Movement (AIM), and regional pushes for tribal sovereignty helped accelerate the demand for meaningful public acknowledgment.

In 1968, Governor Ronald Reagan issued the state's first formal proclamation for American Indian Day, which recognized the cultural contributions of Native peoples but did not yet declare an official holiday. Eleven years later, in 1979, Assembly Bill 2694 authored by Assemblymember Richard Robinson, passed through the legislature, formally establishing California Native American Day as an annual statewide observance to be recognized on the fourth Friday of September. The holiday was originally designated as an observance day rather than a state holiday partly because of budgetary concerns and partly because lawmakers sought to focus the day on public education initiatives rather than on government closure. Still, the passage of AB 2694 represented a historic shift, marking California as one of the first states in the nation to codify a day specifically honoring Indigenous cultures, sovereignty, and history.

Subsequent governors including Gray Davis, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jerry Brown, and Gavin Newsom have issued annual Native American Day proclamations affirming the state's commitment to acknowledging both historical harms and the resilience of Native nations. The proclamations often explicitly reference the violence enacted through the California Mission System, the bounties placed on Native people during the early American period, the denial of voting rights and land ownership, and the struggles for federal recognition that many tribes continue to face. In 2019, Governor Newsom issued a landmark apology recognizing the state's role in genocide and systemic discrimination, an apology that deepened the meaning of Native American Day by embedding it within a broader governmental acknowledgment of past injustices. Newsom's apology and subsequent executive actions, including the establishment of the Truth and Healing Council, reflect the modern expansion of the holiday's significance. Native American Day today is not merely a celebratory observance, but a day grounded in truth-telling, cultural revitalization, and the strengthening of government relationships between California and its tribal nations.

In parallel with the statewide holiday, counties and municipalities across California have adopted localized recognitions, resolutions, and educational initiatives. Santa Clara County, home to the ancestral territory of the Ohlone peoples, has been particularly active in advancing Native American recognition through formal resolutions, cultural partnerships, and public-school curriculum reforms. The county's Board of Supervisors

has issued multiple proclamations recognizing Native American Heritage Month in November as well as California Native American Day in September, affirming the county's commitment to acknowledging the ongoing presence of Native communities. In recent years, Santa Clara County has made land acknowledgment practices common at governmental meetings and public events, formally recognizing the land as the historic territory of the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe, the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band, and the Tamien Nation. Such recognitions have become increasingly institutionalized, appearing in city meetings in San José, Santa Clara, Sunnyvale, Morgan Hill, and Gilroy, as well as at civic celebrations, cultural festivals, and library programming throughout the region.

Santa Clara County's recognition of Native American Day is not limited to official proclamations; it also includes partnerships with local tribal communities and expanded education in schools and public institutions. For example, county public libraries frequently host cultural workshops, storytelling sessions, youth craft lessons, and speaker events around Native American Day and Native American Heritage Month. These programs emphasize Indigenous authors, the history of local tribes, and contemporary issues facing Native communities. Schools in the county particularly in San José Unified, Morgan Hill Unified, Gilroy Unified, and East Side Union High School District have increasingly integrated Indigenous studies into their social science curricula, inspired in part by statewide frameworks that mandate the teaching of historically accurate information about the California missions, Indigenous resistance movements, tribal sovereignty, and modern Native governance structures. This educational shift has been especially important in Santa Clara County, where the mission-era mythologizing was historically strong due to the presence of Mission Santa Clara de Asís, which for decades shaped public perception of Indigenous experiences. Today, schools teach a more nuanced and accurate understanding of mission history, ensuring students learn about the coercive labor systems, demographic collapse, cultural suppression, and acts of Indigenous resilience that occurred during the period.

Local events within Santa Clara County have also expanded around Native American Day, increasingly reflecting community engagement with Indigenous cultural revitalization. San José has hosted annual or periodic Native cultural celebrations, often featuring Ohlone dancers, basket weavers, drummers, storytellers, and tribal speakers. Events at the School of Arts and Culture at the Mexican Heritage Plaza, the San José Museum of Quilts and Textiles, History San José, and the Children's Discovery Museum often highlight Indigenous art, traditional ecological knowledge, and the history of Ohlone land stewardship. San José State University, located on ancestral Ohlone land, has developed its own Native American Student Organization (NASO) events around Native

American Day and Indigenous Peoples' Day, offering public lectures, film screenings, and cultural activities that educate the broader community.

In South County, the City of Gilroy has acknowledged Ohlone history through public programs, historical exhibits, and land-based educational partnerships. While no single large annual event dominates the region's Native American Day calendar, a pattern of recurring community engagements such as Ohlone cultural presentations at Gilroy Library, youth education programs hosted by the Amah Mutsun Land Trust in nearby protected lands, and county parks programming at places such as Coyote Lake-Harvey Bear Ranch and Chitactac-Adams Heritage County Park collectively forms a core of local observance. Chitactac-Adams is one of the most significant local cultural sites. Located near Gilroy, the park contains petroglyphs, bedrock mortars, and interpretive educational displays documenting the Ohlone presence. Santa Clara County Parks uses Native American Day as an anchor in seasonal programming, offering guided walks, historical interpretation, and youth workshops that explore Ohlone cultural practices, land-use techniques, and the significance of the site to tribal communities.

The educational impact of Native American Day in Santa Clara County extends beyond public schools into higher education and community institutions. Santa Clara University, originally established as Mission Santa Clara, has undergone an ongoing process of reexamining its institutional history and its relationship to Native peoples. The university's anthropology and ethnic studies departments now incorporate materials that critically examine missionization and Indigenous survival. Public lectures, archeological exhibitions, and community-engaged research with Ohlone groups frequently align with the themes of Native American Day, reinforcing the connection between academic scholarship and civic recognition. De Anza College, located in Cupertino, hosts annual Indigenous cultural events and maintains partnerships with local tribal communities, emphasizing the holiday as part of a broader learning framework centered on decolonizing education and acknowledging the original stewards of the land.

Statewide, California legislation has increasingly embedded Native American Day into the public education expectations of K-12 schools. The state's History Social Science Framework, adopted in 2016 and continuously refined, mandates instruction on the diversity of California tribes, the trauma of colonization, and the resilience of Indigenous cultures. Additionally, the 2021 requirement that all California State University students complete an ethnic studies course further elevates the role of Indigenous studies in higher education. Native American Day serves as a focal point for educators developing lesson plans, encouraging schools to link classroom instruction with broader cultural and historical awareness. For students in Santa Clara County, this often includes learning

about the Ohlone people not as symbolic historical figures but as contemporary tribal nations engaged in language revival, cultural restoration, ecological stewardship, and political advocacy.

The modern significance of Native American Day also lies in its influence on public policy, environmental stewardship, and land return efforts in California. The Amah Mutsun Land Trust's work in the Santa Cruz Mountains, Coyote Valley, and South Santa Clara County has brought Indigenous ecological knowledge into regional conservation planning. Native American Day often highlights this intersection of cultural recognition and environmental policy. Santa Clara County's open space districts, including the Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority, frequently collaborate with tribal leaders to acknowledge Ohlone ecological expertise, incorporate Indigenous practices into land management, and develop educational programming that foregrounds Native relationships with the land. These collaborations reinforce the holiday's broader purpose: to recognize Indigenous peoples not only in the past tense but as vital contributors to California's present and future.

Furthermore, Santa Clara County's cultural institutions have embraced Native American Day as an opportunity to challenge long-standing erasures of Indigenous identity. Museums, libraries, and civic organizations have increasingly committed to presenting Native voices authentically and respectfully. Indigenous curation, tribal consultation, and community-led programming have become central components of local observance. This shift in cultural representation is deeply tied to the holiday's origins, which were rooted in the demand for accurate portrayals of Native history. The holiday therefore functions as part of a broader cultural transformation one that expands beyond annual observance and into daily institutional practice.

In recent years, Native American Day has also influenced legislative advocacy in California. New bills, such as efforts supporting tribal land repatriation, the protection of sacred sites, expanded funding for Native language revitalization, and reparative justice initiatives are often discussed publicly in connection with the holiday. Santa Clara County representatives in the California Legislature frequently reference Indigenous history and the importance of Native American Day when discussing statewide policy affecting tribal nations. This political dimension reinforces the holiday as a living tool of civic reflection and legislative accountability.

The ongoing evolution of Native American Day reflects a broader, societal shift toward truth-telling about California's past. The growing adoption of Indigenous land acknowledgments, improved K-12 history education, protection of sacred lands, and increased visibility of Indigenous voices in public life all extend from the foundational

purpose of the holiday. Santa Clara County, with its deep Ohlone history and active Native-led community partnerships, plays an essential role in advancing these goals. The holiday's observance in the county not only honors ancestral history but also strengthens the living relationships between tribal nations, civic institutions, and residents.

Ultimately, Native American Day is both a commemorative and transformative observance. It connects California's legislative history, the survival of Indigenous peoples, educational reform, and the local cultural life of communities such as those in Santa Clara County. As the state continues to grapple with its colonial legacy, the holiday stands as a reminder of the importance of acknowledging the truth, supporting Indigenous sovereignty, and building a more just future rooted in respect for the first peoples of the land. The continued growth of events, programs, and educational initiatives in Santa Clara County demonstrates that Native American Day is not solely a symbolic gesture. Rather, it is an active, evolving commitment to learning, honoring, and uplifting Native communities whose presence continues to shape the cultural, historical, and political landscape of California.