



CALIFORNIA NATIVE AMERICAN DAY: A BRIEF HISTORY



California Native American Day is a statewide observance that honors the First Peoples of the land now known as California. The holiday celebrates living cultures, affirms and upholds Tribal sovereignty, and educates the broader public about California Native history, resilience, and contemporary leadership. More than a commemoration, it is a living commitment to visibility, healing, and partnership. It uplifts language, arts, and cultural revitalization led by Tribal communities; broadens public understanding of Indigenous history and contemporary priorities; strengthens government-to-government relationships and consultation; and underscores stewardship of natural and cultural resources. Above all, it honors the creativity, innovation, and leadership of Native peoples in every sector of California life, honoring ancestors while investing in the future.

The Early Days (1939–1967): In 1939, Governor Culbert Olson proclaimed October 1 as “California Indian Day,” encouraging public recognition of Native Californians. Community celebrations expanded, including a notable 1949 event at Sacramento’s McClatchy Park organized by the Federated Indians of California and the Sacramento Tribal Community. Records recall organizers and community leaders such as Marie Potts, Bertha Stewart, Arthur Treppa, Pansy Marine, John Porter, Elizabeth Patty, Mabel Strong, Lydia Williams, Raymond Paddy, and others. The gathering featured a community picnic, a softball game, and traditional dances from Lake County and Ione.

A Capitol Tradition (1968–1997): In 1968, California Tribal leaders, in partnership with Governor Ronald Reagan, established the observance on the fourth Friday of September, launching a Capitol grounds celebration near N and 13th Streets. That year, an Indian grinding rock and bronze plaque were installed, and a ceremonial acorn tree was planted, with attendees using abalone shells during the planting, while traditional dance groups from Sacramento, Amador, Lake, and Plumas counties led the celebration. Successive governors continued the observance annually.

A State Holiday (1998–present): In 1998, the California State Assembly enacted AB 1953, signed into law by Governor Pete Wilson on September 21, establishing California Native American Day as an official state holiday. The tradition now flourishes across Tribal lands and cities statewide. The State Capitol celebration has grown into one of the largest annual events on the grounds, drawing an estimated 3,000–4,000 attendees each year. 100+ exhibitors, and 20 retail vendors each year. The 59th annual celebration carries the theme “Inherent Sovereignty: Tribal Nations Fighting to Protect Our Land and Defend Our People” and will welcome over 100 informational exhibitors, more than 45 retail vendors, nearly 20 cultural practitioners and Tribal Cultural departments, and 4 food trucks.

About the Organizers

Event Host: California Tribal Chairpersons Association (CTCA). CTCA unites Tribal leaders statewide to advance sovereignty and community well-being, serving as a central forum on priorities such as cultural and natural resource protection, health, education, and economic development.

Legislative Sponsor: California Native American Legislative Caucus. Formed in 2021 and chaired by Assemblymember James C. Ramos, the Caucus elevates Native priorities in the Legislature by advancing policy, education, and partnerships that strengthen State–Tribal relationships.

Planning Committee: Led by the California State Tribal Liaisons. State Tribal Liaisons are designated representatives within agencies and departments who facilitate government-to-government consultation with California Tribes. For this event, they coordinate logistics and program planning alongside dedicated community volunteers.

