

The Kentucky Center for Native American Art and Culture

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Contrary to popular myths that are still being taught in our schools today, Indigenous people and tribes have lived in Kentucky since time immemorial. When Kentucky was declared the fifteenth state on June 1, 1792, more than twenty Indigenous Nations held legal claims to the land, including the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Chippewa, Delaware, Eel River, Haudenosaunee, Kaskaskia, Kickapoo, Miami, Ottawa, Piankeshaw, Potawatomi, Piqua Shawnee, Wea, and Wyandot. At that time, Kentucky was also considered home to the Mingo and Creek (Yuchi and Yamacraw). Since then, Indigenous peoples and tribes in Kentucky have, despite great hardships and little recognition or visibility, preserved their art and culture, generation after generation. The Kentucky Center for Native American Art and Culture (KCNAAC) is a celebration and tribute to this perseverance.

The formation of the KCNAAC stems from the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966, signed into Public Law (89-665) by President Lyndon Baines Johnson, as well as other important historic events. Through the NHPA a National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) was created, which documents historically significant Indigenous places, objects, and culture. The bill also provided funding to establish a State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) and staff to conduct surveys, undertake comprehensive preservation planning, and establish standards for programs in each state. The NHPA also required all states to establish a mechanism for certifying local governments to participate in the National Register nomination and funding programs.

In response to the NHPA, Governor Edward Breathitt created the Kentucky Heritage Council (KHC) in 1966 as an agency of the Commerce Cabinet (KRS 171.3801-KRS 171.395). One of the directives of the KHC is to identify, preserve, and protect all meaningful Indigenous cultural resources in the state. The KHC subsequently focused its efforts on the documentation and preservation of vestiges of Indigenous artistic and cultural resources from hundreds and even thousands of years ago. Contemporary Indigenous people, tribes, and organizations in the Commonwealth were essentially ignored because they were not included in the original composition of the NHPA.

The visibility of Indigenous people in Kentucky began to change with the passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (AIRFA), which was signed into Public Law (95-341) by President James Earl Carter Jr. on August 11, 1978. Not only does the AIRFA protect and preserve the inherent right of all Indigenous people and tribes to believe, express, and exercise traditional religions and use items of artistic and material culture that are considered sacred, it also provides Indigenous people with unlimited access to sacred sites, including those in Kentucky that are listed on the National Register

of Historic Places. Unfortunately, these sites also attracted the attention of grave robbers and plunderers for profit.

In 1987, the repugnantly large-scale pillaging of a cemetery near Uniontown, Kentucky brought international attention to the Indigenous people, tribes, and organizations in the Commonwealth when they spoke out against the desecration. The outcome was a positive change in laws concerning the protection, preservation, and conservation of these sacred places. Most notable was the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), signed into federal law (25 U.S.C. 3001) by President George Bush Sr. on November 16, 1990. NAGPRA provides a process for the return of human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony to Indigenous lineal descendants and culturally affiliated tribes.

At the time NAGPRA was signed into law, Kentucky still did not recognize Indigenous people, tribes, and organizations in the Commonwealth. Governor Wallace C. Wilkerson signed a proclamation recognizing the Delilah Whitecloud United Cherokee and the Piqua Shawnee as tribes in Kentucky on April 12 and August 13, 1991, respectively. Following state recognition, Tom and Martha Jones incorporated the Kentucky Native American Indian Council (KNAIC). The primary goal of this not-for-profit organization is to educate the public about significant contributions that Indigenous peoples and tribes have made to Kentucky's rich cultural heritage, and address common misconceptions and stereotypes. Through increased educational awareness efforts of the KNAIC, the people of Kentucky have a better understanding of the histories, cultures, and matters of concern to contemporary Indigenous people and tribes.

Since 1991, the KNAIC has sponsored the Annie Tramper Fall Indian Festival. It carries on the Commonwealth's long tradition of Indigenous Socials, Festivals, and Pow Wows, which can be traced back to Chief Johnson's events in Bullitt County, almost fifty years ago. These events provide a positive meeting place for our peoples, as well as Indigenous visibility for the dominant culture.

By 1996, the NHPA had been amended many times to include Indigenous people, tribes, and organizations in partnership with State and Federal government to provide leadership in the preservation of cultural resources. The amendments were specifically made to assist Indigenous people in the expansion and acceleration of historic preservation programs and activities. The intention of the amendments was to foster communication, cooperation, and coordination between Indigenous people and the SHPOs in the planning and administration of the NHPA. These activities include the identification, evaluation, protection, and interpretation of historic properties. The new amendments to the NHPA allow cultural items and properties of traditional religious and cultural importance to Indigenous people, tribes, and organizations to be protected and eligible for inclusion on the NRHP.

The amendments to NHPA made it essential that all preservation-related activities, including planning, are carried out in consultation with Indigenous people, tribes, and organizations. In 1996, First Lady of Kentucky, Judi Conway Patton, a person of

Indigenous heritage, felt strongly that Indigenous people, tribes, and organizations should be represented in the KHC and state government. At her urging, Governor Paul Edward Patton established the Kentucky Native American Heritage Commission (KNAHC) under KRS 12.029, as an advisory board attached to the Education, Arts, and Humanities Cabinet (EAHC), and authorized by Executive Order 96-272 on March 5, 1996.

The duties of the KNAHC are to advise the KHC, the EAHC, and the Kentucky General Assembly on matters relating to Indigenous heritage, and encourage other public and private agencies within the areas of the arts, humanities, and sciences to incorporate Indigenous influence when developing programs on the history and heritage of Kentucky. The KNAHC represents a network of groups and individuals interested or actively involved in promoting an awareness of Indigenous heritage in Kentucky. It supports the preservation, conservation, and interpretation of significant buildings, sites, structures, documents, artifacts, and lifestyles that represent and embody Indigenous heritage, and it recognizes and sanctions projects that advance a wider knowledge of Indigenous contributions that influence and impact on life in Kentucky.

Since the creation of the KNAHC, Kentucky has participated in the Governor's Interstate Indian Council (GIIC), a national organization established in 1949 by the National Governors' Association to promote and enhance government relations between Tribal Nations and the states. Its mission is to bring respect and recognition to the individual sovereignty of Tribal Nations and states. The GIIC also supports the preservation of traditional Indian culture, language, and values, and encourages socioeconomic development aimed at tribal self-sufficiency. Kentucky has three GIIC representatives, KNAHC Chairperson Tom Jones, the Honorable Reginald Meeks, and the Circle of Wisdom Unity Conference (COWUC) Chairman Bruce Brading.

In 1997, the COWUC was founded as an umbrella organization for Indigenous peoples, tribes, and more than thirty Indigenous organizations in Kentucky. The COWUC was incorporated in 1998 as a not-for-profit organization to disperse information that benefits all Indigenous people and tribes. Since then, the COWUC has become the primary proactive conduit of information and help for all Indigenous people in the Commonwealth. The Health and Welfare Committee works to insure that Indigenous people are not excluded from federal monies. The Child Welfare Committee works to ensure that the state complies with federal Child Welfare laws. It also works to enroll Indigenous families for child welfare, adoption, and foster care. The Kentucky Original Peoples Committee focuses its efforts on grave and sacred site desecration and repatriations issues. The Insurance Committee provides Liability Insurance for Indigenous events (e.g., Pow Wows, Festivals) across Kentucky. In an effort to preserve Indigenous culture and ways of life, the COWUC develops school curricula on Indigenous culture and heritage that are taught with truth, honor, and pride. Through Chairman of the Board Bruce Brading, President Tressa Brown, and Vice President Marty (Soaring Eagle) Martin, it maintains ties to the KNAHC as a means to work within the Commonwealth for the betterment of all Indigenous people.

In an effort to acknowledge all Indigenous people, tribes, and organizations in Kentucky, Governor Paul Edward Patton signed House Bill 801 on April 7, 1998, which designates November as Native American Indian Month. HB 801 not only recognizes that Indigenous people are important to the state's history, playing a vital role in enhancing the freedom, prosperity, and greatness of the state, it also reflects the Commonwealth's commitment to Indigenous people as an integral part of the social, political, and economic fabric of the state of Kentucky. HB 801 also directs the KHC and the KNAHC to make relevant information available to schools, clubs, and civic and religious organizations, to encourage the recognition of the artistic and cultural contributions of Indigenous people, and to promote a greater understanding and brotherhood between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people of the Commonwealth. Henceforth, the Governor of Kentucky, prior to the first day of November of each year, issues a proclamation inviting and urging the people of the Commonwealth to observe Native American Indian Month with suitable ceremony and fellowship.

At the September 20, 2000 meeting of the KNAHC, a Native American Arts Committee (NAAC) was created. Stephen (Black Bear) LaBoueff (chair) and Darlene Applegate were assigned to the new committee, the goals of which were to promote youth involvement in native arts, educate the public about native arts, and promote Native American artisans in the Commonwealth. During the September 21, 2000 meeting of the KNAHC, goals and priorities for the Commission were identified, one of which related to the development of a Native American cultural center in the Commonwealth. Proposed components of the center included genealogy, library, arts, education and curricula, theatre, history, and culture. An immediate need was funding to conduct a feasibility assessment for such a center. Subsequent to the September KNAHC retreat, State Representative and KNAHC member Reginald Meeks agreed to join the Native American Arts Committee as an *ex officio* member.

The NAAC held its first meeting on November 11, 2000 in Louisville. Existing arts and crafts programs in Kentucky, economic development agencies in Kentucky, and the possible development of a Native American heritage center were discussed. In 2001, the NAAC resumed their dialogue about the center at two KNAHC meetings; on February 23 the mission of such a center was considered; and on November 8, University of Kentucky undergraduate honor student Courtney Stoll presented the results of her year-long project on a Native American cultural center in Kentucky. Her work focused on location, building form and architecture, programs, development resources, and funding options. Commission members provided valuable feedback and suggestions to Ms. Stoll. The NAAC of the KNAHC was charged with assisting Ms. Stoll on a feasibility study and developing a narrative for a Native American cultural center. In addition, the name of the NAAC was changed to the Arts and Culture Committee (ACC).

At the March 13, 2002 meeting of the KNAHC, AAC Chair Black Bear presented a detailed presentation about the proposed Native American cultural center, including mission statement, vision statement, programs, exterior architectural renderings, internal floor plans, two possible construction sites, and web page. The KNAHC approved the

disbursement of \$2000 to fund a formal planning meeting for the project. That meeting took place at E.P. Tom Sawyer State Park on January 16-17, 2003.

Acting on behalf of the KNAHC Arts and Culture Committee, Black Bear and Reginald Meeks met with the Secretary of the EAHC Marlene M. Helm in April 2002. The purpose of the Frankfort meeting was to explore relationships with programs such as the Kentucky Folklife Program. It was during this meeting that Black Bear envisioned a center for Indigenous art and culture in the Commonwealth.

On May 14, 2003, the Kentucky Center for Native American Art and Culture (KCNAAC) was incorporated with a mission that would spotlight Indigenous arts and crafts, promote research on Indigenous cultures, and provide a gathering place for Indigenous peoples. Executive Board members of the KCNAAC joined then First Lady Judi Conway Patton in a search for suitable land in Kentucky to build the Center. On November 21, 2003, the Executive Board chose an 85-acre tract of surplus land in General Butler State Resort in Carrollton as its future home. The site is located in Northern Kentucky Congressional District 04, which includes Northern Kentucky University (NKU), home of the only Native American Studies program in the state. An interagency lease agreement was made between the Commonwealth of Kentucky and the EAHC, on behalf of the KNAHC, to develop the KCNAAC, whose mission will honor, celebrate, and recognize Indigenous peoples for their heritage and contributions to the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

Since the incorporation of the KCNAAC, the state recognition of Indigenous people, tribes, and organizations was strengthened on April 2, 2004 when Governor Ernie Fletcher, a person of Indigenous heritage, signed House Bill 167 into law. HB 167 was written by Reginald Meeks and passed by both houses. It ensures that the KNAHC is a permanent part of the Governor's cabinet to promote awareness of Indigenous influences within the historical and cultural experiences of Kentucky. The KCNAAC is now a significant aspect of this mission.

The KCNAAC has a Board of Directors currently comprised of eighteen members, including Indigenous artists, historians, scholars, builders, engineers, and community members.