

12 False Stories About Native Americans

story by Julie Maji – msn.com

By uncovering thirteen of the most common falsehoods, we can start to see how they've shaped our view of Indigenous people. It's time to replace these old, misleading ideas with real, living truths that honor the diversity and strength of Native nations.

1. Native Americans all lived in teepees on open plains.

In reality, Indigenous peoples built many types of homes, from longhouses to pueblos to earth lodges. Native Americans were not one group with one lifestyle, they were thousands of communities shaped by their own environments, traditions, and innovations.

2. Native peoples disappeared soon after European contact.

Indigenous nations didn't disappear—they adapted, rebuilt, and continue to thrive today. As reported by Oldest.org, there are currently hundreds of federally recognized tribes across North America, each with unique governments, languages, and traditions. Indigenous nations are not only surviving but growing, leading environmental movements, running businesses, and shaping modern life in countless ways.

3. Reservations were pristine lands set aside for gratitude.

Most reservations were established through forced relocation to lands that were often infertile, isolated, or less desirable to settlers. Many were created through broken treaties and coercion.

4. All Native Americans share a single unified culture.

The Inuit in Alaska lived completely differently from the Cherokee in the Southeast or the Hopi in the Southwest. When we talk about Indigenous people, we're talking about thousands of nations with unique worldviews. Indigenous nations have hundreds of languages, religions, and governance systems. Tribes in the Pacific Northwest lived off salmon and cedar; Great Plains Indians followed buffalo migrations; others in the Southwest built vast irrigation networks.

5. Native Americans don't pay taxes or receive endless benefits.

Most Native Americans pay taxes like everyone else. Only certain tribal lands and specific situations are exempt, and even then, it's tied to treaty rights, not freebies. The idea that Native communities live off government "benefits" ignores how much was taken from them, land, resources, and lives. Many tribes still face poverty, limited infrastructure, and underfunded services.

6. Native people are stuck in the past without modern lives.

Too many people still imagine Native Americans as figures from the 1800s, wearing traditional regalia and living apart from the modern world. But Indigenous people live in cities, use technology, run businesses, and create art that reflects today's realities. Many balance modern life while keeping traditional practices alive. Native communities are part of today's culture—leaders, scientists, teachers, and artists shaping the world around us right now.

7. The myth of ancient superior white "Mound Builder" cultures preceding Native Americans.

This old myth claimed that great earthworks across North America were built by some "lost white race." That idea came from early European settlers who couldn't believe Indigenous people had created such advanced architecture. Modern archaeology has long proven those mounds were built by the ancestors of modern Native nations. Dismissing Indigenous engineering was a way to justify stealing land. The truth is, these societies were brilliant planners, builders, and farmers who shaped the continent's landscape with skill and intention.

8. Thanksgiving was about friendly interactions only.

The Thanksgiving story we all learned in school skips a lot of reality. It paints a peaceful meal of friendship and gratitude, but the real story was far more complex. The Wampanoag people helped the Pilgrims survive, but what followed was centuries of broken promises, land theft, and conflict. Telling only the happy parts erases that pain. Understanding Thanksgiving's deeper context doesn't take away gratitude—it adds truth to it. When we remember who was there, and what came after, we can celebrate with respect instead of fiction.

9. Native Americans were primitive.

Calling Indigenous people "primitive" ignores evidence of large, thriving societies. Long before European settlers arrived, Indigenous civilizations like Cahokia and the Pueblo peoples built massive cities and complex trade systems. They cultivated corn, beans, and squash with advanced farming techniques that sustained millions. They also managed forests, rivers, and ecosystems with precision. These weren't small, wandering groups—they were architects of entire regions. Recognizing that shifts the entire story of the Americas from discovery to acknowledgment of existing civilizations that thrived for centuries.

10. Native Americans willingly gave up their lands for peace.

Many history books make it sound as if tribes signed away their land willingly, but most treaties were made under pressure, trickery, or threat of violence. When tribes refused, they faced starvation or military force. Even the treaties that were signed were often ignored or broken by the U.S. government. Framing these losses as peaceful agreements turns tragedy into consent. The truth is that much of this land was taken, not given, and remembering that truth honors the people who fought to keep it.

12. Native spirituality is the same across all tribes and

open for appropriation. Native spirituality isn't one-size-fits-all, and it's not something anyone can casually adopt. Each tribe has its own sacred beliefs and ceremonies tied deeply to its land and history. Treating Indigenous spirituality like a universal "lifestyle" strips it of meaning and context. When people borrow rituals or symbols without understanding them, it turns sacred traditions into trends.

13. All Native stories are myth or legend without historical

basis. Labeling Indigenous stories as "myths" makes them sound like fiction, but many contain centuries of knowledge. Oral traditions record migrations, weather patterns, and ancestral memory with accuracy proven by modern research. These stories are history told in a different form. They teach lessons, explain relationships with nature, and pass down wisdom. When we treat them as fairy tales, we silence entire systems of understanding. Listening instead of labeling gives us access to one of the oldest, richest storytelling traditions on Earth.

9 Facts: Native People in Society & the Church



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RELIGION & RACE
The United Methodist Church

1. We are diverse. There are over 570 federally recognized tribes, nations, villages, clans, and more across the United States, along with 61 state-recognized tribes. Each nation has its own language, culture, values, and history. The diversity among indigenous peoples in this country is amazing and beautiful. No one person or group can "speak of" all Indigenous persons.

2. We are not a mascot. Most Indigenous persons feel they are not "honored" when their cultural image, symbols, and faces are stereotyped and used as sports mascots by non-Native people.

3. There are many names for us. There is no specific term that is suitable for all. Many tribal peoples prefer to be called by the tribe they represent. The United Methodist Church has used "Native Americans" for many years, but other acceptable terms include "American Indians," "First Nations," "Indigenous," "First Americans."

4. Not all of us live on reservations. There are 326 reservations across the United States, yet less than 30% of all American Indians and Alaska Natives live on them. 8% live in small towns and rural areas outside reservations and 70% live in urban settings.

5. Our regalia and dances are sacred. Our ritualistic dances should not be mimicked for comedy nor should our ceremonial clothing (like the feathered headdress) be worn as costumes for Halloween. Our regalia is sacred. Wearing indigenous regalia is considered "cultural appropriation."

6. We served in the U.S. military. American Indians and Alaska Natives serve in the U.S. Armed Forces at the highest rate of any ethnic group. Native veterans have served with distinction in every major conflict over the past 200 years. Many of our Native veterans worship in United Methodist churches.

7. We are United Methodist leaders. The first Native District Superintendent in Methodism was the Rev. Samuel Checote, a Muscogee, who was appointed in 1868. In 1992, the Rev. Dr. Lois Neal, a Cherokee, became the first Native woman appointed D.S.. In 2022, Rev. David Wilson, a member of the Choctaw nation, was the first Native American elected as bishop. Hundreds of others serve as pastors and lay leaders of our local churches. There are 157 Native American United Methodist congregations in the U.S. A unique body within the denomination serves the highest concentration of Indian United Methodist congregations across Oklahoma, Kansas, and Texas, called the Oklahoma Indian Mission Conference.

8. We make significant cultural contributions. The constitution of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy was used as a model for the Articles of Confederation, later incorporated into the U.S. Constitution. Indigenous peoples cultivated corn over 10,000 years ago and taught the first European immigrants how to grow the crop. Indigenous doctors identified plants that provided anesthetics and ointment for healing of the skin.

9. We must constantly prove who we are. To gain U.S. federal-government recognition and protection, Native Americans must document their racial identity. The Dawes Commission of 1887 requires every Native American in the country to register. Tribal peoples must register with their tribes to prove their lineage. Each tribe issues a tribal card and the government issues a Certificate Degree of Indian Blood to individuals. These cards are used to prove eligibility for government services.