

Celebrating Native American Heritage Month and Giving Thanks

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Many people do not realize how much influence indigenous American culture and history has had on America. November is Native American Heritage Month and, to celebrate, Brouse McDowell's Diversity & Inclusion Committee wants to highlight a few ways indigenous Americans have influenced our lives.

Did you know that the names of many states, cities, counties, and rivers are derived from indigenous languages? In fact, over half of our states' names are derived from various words from indigenous languages, including Ohio.¹ "Ohio" comes from the Iroquoian word for the Ohio River, "Ohiiyo," and is commonly translated as "beautiful river," "it is beautiful," or "good river."²

Cuyahoga is another name that originates from indigenous languages. Those familiar with Northeast Ohio know that Cuyahoga is the name of a famous river that divides the east and west sides of Cleveland and which runs through Cuyahoga County and empties into Lake Erie.³ The true origin of the name "Cuyahoga" and meaning behind it has been debated throughout history. The most popular theories are that the word either came from the Mohawk word "Cayagaga" which means "crooked river" or, from the Seneca word "Cuyohaga" which means "place of the jawbone."⁴

More significant than the many names derived from indigenous languages, is the fact that indigenous Americans are credited with developing or discovering about sixty percent of the food eaten across the world today⁵ and for introducing many of the classic Thanksgiving dishes enjoyed this time of year. The most famous staples are the "Three Sisters," which is comprised of squash, corn, and beans.⁶ The Three Sisters are a perfect example of how the indigenous Americans excelled in agriculture. Without fail, these three crops were always planted together, because the crops worked in harmony and helped each other grow.⁷ The corn provided a pole for the beans to climb, the shade from the corn helped the squash grow, the beans provided nitrogen for the corn and squash, and the shade from the large squash helped to keep moisture in the ground which benefited all of the plants.⁸ Without indigenous Americans, corn, beans, squash, wild rice, avocados, peanuts, sweet potatoes, and chocolate would not look like they do today.⁹

Although it is important to recognize and understand these contributions and many others, it is more important to understand the struggles that indigenous Americans have endured throughout history. For some, Thanksgiving is seen as a day of mourning—commemorating the years of oppression and genocide of the Pequot, Wampanoag as well as other indigenous people. Others celebrate the holiday's positive messages mirroring values of indigenous American culture—the gathering of family, friends and community, gratitude for what we have, and the idea of giving without expecting anything in return.

Sources:

¹ <http://www.native-languages.org/state-names.htm>

² <https://web.archive.org/web/20070202230727/http://americanindianstudies.osu.edu/ohio.cfm>

³ <https://case.edu/ech/articles/c/cuyahoga-river>

⁴ *Id*

⁵ https://www.heraldmailmedia.com/life/columns/native-american-indian-influence-on-today-s-foods/article_1c97e3fb-d6c6-506a-bfed-1356621915ca.html

⁶ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352618116300750>

⁷ *Id*; <https://www.democratandchronicle.com/story/rochester-magazine/finger-lakes/2015/10/28/falk-culinary-history-finger-lakes/74673290/>

⁸ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352618116300750>

⁹ <https://www.powwows.com/native-american-foods-throughout-the-united-states/>

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