

### Section 1: Exhibition Introduction and the Invention of Thanksgiving

Indians are in this country's DNA and have shaped it from the beginning. Images and names of American Indians are everywhere in American life and are worth closer examination. They are indicative of an entangled history. The Thanksgiving holiday is used as an example to introduce the exhibition's themes. In this section, visitors explore the ways in which Indian names and images—both historical and contemporary—have shaped and continue to shape how we think about American Indians. Here, audiences are immersed in objects and imagery from American culture that illustrate the complexity of American Indians' placement in popular culture. Visitors can consider how Americans use language and imagery to describe Indians.

- **Indians Everywhere:** Indians are less than 1 percent of the population. Yet everywhere you go in the United States, you see images of American Indians. Why? How then is it possible that Indians can be so present and so absent in American life? One reason is that Americans are still trying to come to grips with centuries of wildly mixed feelings about Indians. They have been seen as both authentic and threatening, strange yet deeply appealing. Objects and images will help spark unexpected memories of visitors' perceptions of American Indians.
- **Once Upon a Time, Indians were the Americans:** Soon after Europeans arrived, they called the New World America and called the original inhabitants Americans. Not American Indians. Not Native Americans. Just Americans. This exhibition is titled Americans because the name first meant the people who originally lived here.
- **Curator video:** Side 1.B offers a video from curator Paul Chaat Smith providing background on the exhibition. Many people in the United States might think that they have little connection to American Indians, when, in fact, the exact opposite is usually true.
- **Digital Interactivity:** Visitors can use supplied handhelds to scan a QR code to access the exhibition's digital experience, including special curator videos, photos and content that dig deeper into exhibition topics.
- **Indians Are Everywhere in American Life:** Nearly all that can be named or sold has at some point been named or sold using an Indian word or image. It's a practice that started before the United States existed. Those images are worth a closer look. What if they are not trivial? What if they are instead symbols of great power? What if the stories they tell reveal a buried history—and a country forever fascinated, conflicted, and shaped by its relationship with American Indians? A digital interactive will offer background on items that use Indian words or imagery.
- **American Indian or Native American?** Throughout the exhibition you'll notice these terms. Both are acceptable. Many prefer Native, Indigenous, or, better yet, the name of their specific nation. This exhibition mainly uses Indian.
- **Thanksgiving: It Was No Picnic:** A curator video will introduce the ways that the

Thanksgiving holiday is a way to introduce the exhibition's themes. Underneath the trappings of Thanksgiving, Americans are trying to come to terms with difficult truths about the United States.

- **You Think You Know the Story, But: Americans** focuses on four historical events: Thanksgiving, the life of Pocahontas, the Trail of Tears, and the Battle of Little Bighorn. These events infuse both American history and contemporary life. The exhibition shows what is remembered, contested, cherished, and denied, and why that still resonates.

## **Section 2: Pocahontas: She Didn't Save John Smith. She Saved America.**

Pocahontas, a central figure in American history, is both celebrated and misunderstood. This section challenges the romanticized narrative of Pocahontas saving John Smith and acknowledges that the actual events likely differed from the legend. Her story is part of America's story; this section addresses the idea of "So wrong, yet so right" and that the legends told are likely not the true events. Pocahontas lived just 22 years, left behind no recorded words, and sat for only one portrait. Yet, there are countless images of her, but each is a projection of another's ideas. She became a rich, powerful woman and a key figure in the country's founding. But, even more improbable for an Indigenous woman of the 1600s, she is in our heads today.

- **1616: The Face of America: No Indian in U.S. history** has been as beloved, revered, and officially honored as Pocahontas. She has been a constant presence in American life since before the country existed. Her extraordinary life embodied the promise, peril, and dilemmas of the early 1600s. She was in the middle of almost everything during the years when Jamestown was a failing English colony, and later when it became a roaring success. Even before her death, the mythmaking had begun. The meaning of her life is still debated by her descendants, the state she helped create, and the country itself.
- **Jamestown:** In 1607, 104 Englishmen landed on the banks of a river in Powhatan territory. They built a fort and named it after their king, James I. The first year, disease, starvation, and occasional Indian attacks left more Englishmen dead than alive. Jamestown should have been a colossal failure. Instead, the disastrous colony became England's greatest success. Pocahontas was in the middle of it all. Within a 100 years, in the leadup to the American Revolution, the English in the increasingly powerful colony, now Americans, made her into a symbol of the colony and its success, marking a sharp break of being English
- **Presenting Pocahontas:** When Pocahontas was born in 1595 almost everyone who lived on the East Coast was an American Indian. Her father, Powhatan, was the leader of a powerful confederacy in the Mid-Atlantic. Pocahontas would eventually marry English tobacco planter Thomas Rolfe and have a son. In 1616 she sailed to England with her husband and son and was presented at the court of King James I. A year later, at the start of her voyage home, she fell ill and died at the age of 22. Her influence did not stop there. The Brief Life of Pocahontas interactive presents a timeline of events in Pocahontas' life.
- **Face of the New World:** When John Rolfe and his Native bride, now known as Lady Rebecca, traveled to London in 1616, they were a smash hit: rich, famous, and powerful. Pocahontas was introduced as the daughter of the Emperor of Virginia. The trip sent a clear message: the colony was a safe, successful, and profitable enterprise. Her

presence in London allowed Europe to put, for the first time, a human face on the Indigenous peoples of the New World.

- **Savior of Virginia, Founder of America:** Colonial Virginians considered Pocahontas a savior of their colony. Her marriage to John Rolfe forged an alliance between the English and the Powhatan confederacy, which led to a break in warfare between the competing powers. She was in the middle of key events that made the colonists' lives not only possible but profitable. Her husband introduced a strain of tobacco that made the colony rich. Virginia became the wealthiest and most powerful state in the early United States. Americans thereafter have associated Pocahontas with Jamestown and, by extension, with the founding of the country. Counties, towns, and parks are named in her honor. Military vessels have sailed under her name. And Pocahontas is among the few women honored in the U.S. Capitol rotunda.
- **Famous for 400 Years and Counting:** There's no one else like Pocahontas in American history. No other Indian is seen as one of the nation's founders. Since its beginning, the country has been fascinated, conflicted, and shaped by her. Each generation of Americans has looked to Pocahontas for inspiration. During the Civil War, some Virginians fought for the Confederacy under her banner. Abolitionists wrote antislavery tracts in her name. Counties, towns, and parks are named in her honor. Military vessels have sailed under her name. And Pocahontas is among the few women honored in the U.S. Capitol rotunda. A timeline follows notable moments in the interpretation of Pocahontas' legacy.
- **The Enigma of Pocahontas:** Pocahontas had a short life, leaving behind no recorded words and only one portrait. Yet there are countless paintings, illustrations, poems, plays, books, movies, and songs about this famous Indigenous woman. Each is a projection of another's ideas about Pocahontas—a mythic and mysterious figure who captivated people in her own time, and in every generation that followed.
- **The Legend of Pocahontas:** The tale has been repeated for centuries: the English explorer Captain John Smith, captured by Powhatan's men, was about to be clubbed to death when Powhatan's daughter Pocahontas rushed forward to save him. Historians doubt that it ever happened. John Smith was a boastful explorer who wrote so dramatically about his adventures that many were suspicious of his tales. Smith probably misunderstood and exaggerated what happened to him. Rather than threatening his life, Powhatan may have been making him the focus of a ritual performance, possibly to bring him into his confederacy. Nonetheless Smith's dramatic account and its romantic retellings have had tremendous staying power.
- **Pride and Prejudice:** Pocahontas's son, Thomas Pepsimoneh Rolfe, returned to Virginia as a young man. For the next 400 years, influential Virginians proudly asserted that, through him, Pocahontas's blood flowed in their veins. In 1924 Virginia was debating a law that required all Virginians to be identified as either white or colored. It defined as white a person who had "no trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian." It also legislated Indians out of existence since it eliminated the category. Virginia elites who claimed descent from Pocahontas saw that the act would make them technically "colored." At the last minute, a provision was added: Those with 1/16th Indian blood would be classified as white. This is now known as the Pocahontas Exception.

### **Section 3: Trail of Tears: Not What You Think. Not Even Close**

The Trail of Tears, often perceived as a tragic event solely associated with Andrew Jackson's actions, is actually part of a broader narrative. American Indian Removal is presented as a significant national project that profoundly transformed the country. And the section illustrates how the country and its citizens continue to acknowledge and grapple with this dark chapter of our history. This section moves beyond what visitors who have heard of the Trail of Tears may think it is — a tragic thing that happened to Indians because of an evil man (Andrew Jackson). Instead, Americans position Indian Removal as a vast national project that changed the country. This section delves into the complexities: how a nation founded on principles of liberty and equality grappled with the morality of displacing Native people from their ancestral lands. It further explores how removal was justified as a humanitarian act and executed with the full force of the federal bureaucracy.

- **1830: Democracy at a Crossroads:** Fifty years after the American Revolution, the United States passed the Indian Removal Act. One result was the forced relocation of 16,000 Cherokee in 1838, which became known as the Trail of Tears. The act imagined the United States without Indians. It proposed that those living inside the country's boundaries should leave. It promised them payment and new land west of the Mississippi. Supporters argued that it was humanitarian. Opponents said it betrayed democratic values. The logistics took decades. The act cost millions of dollars and thousands of Indian lives. It also reshaped the country. Removal was nearly forgotten for generations. The nation is still coming to terms with what happened and what it means.
- **A Clash of Views:** In the early 1800s a vigorous debate consumed the country. Should Indians be removed from the Southeast? Opponents of removal argued for the inherent sovereign rights of Native nations. Those in favor asserted that Indians hindered economic progress. The debate again and again questioned removal's cost, to American Indians and to the country's soul. A touchscreen interactive presents arguments for and against Indian removal from national leaders.
- **A New Country:** Removal was at the center of an astonishing chapter in American history. Only a few decades earlier, the South had been sparsely populated, filled with European colonial powers and sovereign Indian nations. In the wake of removal, the borders of the United States stretched unbroken from the Atlantic to the Mississippi. The region became an economic engine that generated fortunes from Alabama to New York to London, but at a steep cost: catastrophic consequences for Native American communities and the enslavement of millions. The contradictions became untenable, and they would lead directly to the country's most devastating war. Removal is not just a tragic story about American Indians victimized by a cruel president. Today we remember it as a betrayal of American values. We should also remember that it was thoughtfully debated by the most democratic country on earth, supported by both parties, and broadly popular among its citizens.
- **Nations Within a Nation:** The United States' boundaries were established in 1783 when it signed a treaty with England to end the Revolutionary War. The boundaries were drawn around those of Native nations, whose leaders did not sign or witness the treaty. As the United States grew, state and federal leaders became less tolerant of the Native nations within the United States.
- **Removal: A New Vision for the Country:** President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian

Removal Act into law on May 30, 1830. Carrying out removal tested the young nation's capacity, infrastructure, and political will. It took decades and came at devastating human cost. It also transformed the country. When the project began, America was a fledgling debtor nation. When it was complete, the United States was a global economic power. Ultimately, removal presented a moral test. Could the United States stay true to its ideals? Could it bring prosperity to the South and also treat American Indians with dignity and respect? The nation tried to accomplish both goals. It succeeded at only one. A physical interactive presents some of the numbers that tell the story of the impact.

- **At What Cost? Sidebar:** Removal was supposed to be a smooth and benevolent process. Indians would be clothed, fed, and paid. Instead, it was a mess. For example, in removing the Choctaw, the United States pushed through a fraudulent treaty, supplied insufficient provisions, and forced the deportees to travel during severe winters. Each phase was badly managed and executed. A table supplies estimates of the population of each Native nation that was removed, and of the number of people who died along the way. Deaths were caused by disease, exposure, exhaustion, avoidable accidents, and warfare.
- **Not Civilized Enough Sidebar:** The Indian Removal Act never mentions a tribe or region. But it was aimed at the Cherokee, Muscogee (Creek), Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole nations because their sizeable territories were among the most fertile in the South. They were called the Five Civilized Tribes because they had opened up to missionaries and the larger economy. Their tribal leaders were often Christian and prosperous. Many owned plantations worked by enslaved people. None of that protected them from the greed for land.
- **The Indian Removal Act Passes:** Some in Congress had misgivings about the act, but most persuaded themselves that removal was in the best interests of American Indians. The legislation language was crafted to present the nation as benevolent towards Indians. The act passed by just four votes in the House of Representatives, and Andrew Jackson signed it into law on May 28, 1830.
- **Fingers Crossed Sidebar:** Removal proponents devoutly wished for voluntary, peaceful exchanges of land, with nobody forced to leave. It went against existing policy and American values to expel the entire Indian population. It was also ridiculous to think the young federal government could carry out such a project. The drafters of the Act just laid out a framework and hoped for the best.
- **The Act Wasn't Just about Indians:** The goal was to bring wealth and opportunity to the thinly populated states and territories of the Deep South. There the soil was so dark and rich it became known as the Black Belt. For the United States, the act unlocked the region's potential. It also solved another problem. Indian nations were inside the country's borders. Vast tracts of Native land had been sold or transferred through treaty agreements, but Indians still controlled large amounts of territory. If Indians signed removal treaties, they would no longer be in the way, and the border disputes would be over. A curator video explains the Indian Removal Act and its implications.
- **Noble Savages? Of Course Not Sidebar:** Indians weren't savages, but they weren't perfect. Slave ownership was important to the Cherokee, the Chickasaw, the Muscogee (Creek), and the Choctaw. Although they held far fewer enslaved laborers than the states of Virginia or Mississippi, these Indian nations were legally slave states.

They established slavery in Oklahoma after removal and allied themselves with the Confederacy during the Civil War.

- **A Global Superpower:** Cotton production increased rapidly after the removal act's passage in 1830, setting off the country's greatest economic boom up to that time. Cotton connected Southern plantations, Massachusetts mills, New York financial houses, and traders in London and Liverpool. At the same time that Indians were being shipped up the Mississippi on the voyage to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma), cotton cultivated in their former homelands was being shipped down the river to New Orleans. From there, the cotton would be sent to the Northeast and England.
- **Were the Benefits Worth the Cost?** The human cost of the Removal Act was enormous: catastrophe for Indian nations and a population of enslaved labor that reached four million. The situation would lead directly to the Civil War—with its own count of 620,000 dead.
- **The Nation Acknowledges a Dark Chapter:** A little more than 100 years ago, Indian removal was a forgotten chapter of American history. Why is it in our heads today? Because Native Americans put it there. In the early 1900s, Cherokee and Choctaw poets popularized the phrase “trail of tears.” Today, tribal nations honor their ancestors with bike and motorcycle rides that retrace parts of the trail. During the past century, “trail of tears” has had multiple meanings. First, it described only the Cherokee removal of 1838. Eventually it became shorthand for policies towards all American Indians. The core meaning of the phrase, though, still refers to a moment of national shame. A timeline highlights efforts over the last century to recognize the impact of the Trail of Tears and to incorporate and honor Indian history and culture.

#### **Section 4: Battle of Little Bighorn: Who Really Won? It's Complicated.**

Americans still grapple with the meaning of events like Little Bighorn as they come to terms with the complex history of the West. Not presented as a straightforward history lesson, this section immerses visitors in the national moment of 1876, a time when the United States was celebrating its 100th birthday but was also shocked by a defeat at the hands of Plains warriors. The central question posed is: “Why has the country so vividly remembered a lost battle for more than a century?”

- **1876: The Indians Win:** In June 1876, the U.S. Army suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of the Lakota and the Northern Cheyenne. Eight months later, the United States had won the Great Sioux War and confined to reservations nearly all their Plains Indian adversaries. But instead of celebrating their victory, Americans obsessed for generations about the army's shocking loss at Little Bighorn. In the years following Little Bighorn, a strange thing happened. The Lakota who defeated American soldiers became celebrities, and Plains Indian warriors became symbols of America. A curator video explores the importance of the event.
- **The Battle of Little Bighorn through Native Eyes:** Drawings and paintings depicting warriors' exploits are one of the quintessential Plains Indian art forms. They are also remarkable documents of Plains Indian history. Red Horse was one of about 29 Native artists who chronicled the Battle of Little Bighorn. Most of the works were created within about two decades of the 1876 battle. They show warriors protecting their homelands

and ways of life, and they emphasize the combat prowess of the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho.

- **The Paha Sapa:** The spectacular canyons, gulches, lakes, and forests known as the Black Hills—or, in the Lakota language, the Paha Sapa—is sacred land, deeply tied to Lakota history and spirituality. Once located in the very heart of their territory, the Paha Sapa are the source of the Lakota’s most cherished cultural knowledge. Beginning in 1874 with an army expedition led by Lieutenant Colonel George A. Custer, hundreds of gold prospectors invaded and despoiled this profoundly important landscape.
- **Wichóun: A Lakota Way of Life:** A follower of Sitting Bull named Strike the Kettle commemorated the Battle of Little Bighorn on a 16-foot-long muslin painting in 1877, a year after the event. Most large paintings of this kind focus on a single event. This one evokes instead aspects of Lakota life that place the warriors within an overall value system emphasizing compassion, generosity, and responsibility. Warfare itself was seen as giving oneself for one’s people. The Lakota word for their way of life is wichóun.
- **Generosity, Fortitude, Bravery, Wisdom:** During most of the year, Lakota lived in small groups led by headmen who exemplified Lakota virtues such as generosity, fortitude, bravery, and wisdom. Each group belonged to one of the Lakota’s seven divisions, which were led by wicasas, or shirt wearers. Four leaders were selected from among the wicasas to serve as a governing council. At the time of the Battle of Little Bighorn, the principal Native leaders were Sitting Bull (Hunkpapa Lakota), Crazy Horse (Oglala Lakota), Hump (Miniconjou Lakota), and Two Moon (Cheyenne). Sitting Bull was a holy man as well as a powerful leader.
- **A Shock to the Nation:** On July 6, 1876, news of a “desperate fight” and “terrible slaughter” at Little Bighorn, Montana Territory, reached the army’s headquarters in Washington, D.C. The news then spread rapidly throughout the country. Most Americans learned of the battle just days after jubilant July 4th celebrations had marked the nation’s centennial. In every town, city, state, and territory, Americans were gripped by sensational headlines. The unexpected defeat of Custer, a Civil War hero, made way for a new and powerful national story. It described a battle, and a frontier, won at great sacrifice against a formidable foe. In the decades following Little Bighorn, the very Indians who crushed the 7th Cavalry became celebrities, and beloved Americans.
- **The Battle of the Greasy Grass:** The Battle of Little Bighorn is also known to Americans as Custer’s Last Stand. The winners, the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne, called it the Battle of the Greasy Grass. The battle took place in Montana Territory on June 25–26, 1876. It was triggered by an 1874 U.S. Army expedition into the Black Hills. The expedition, sent to find gold, violated an 1868 treaty recognizing the Black Hills as Lakota land. Soon the region was flooded with prospectors and miners. The ensuing skirmishes led to the battle at Little Bighorn River.
- **Why Remember a Lost Battle Timeline:** Little Bighorn shook 19th-century America to the core. Questions began immediately and never stopped. But the way the country thinks about Little Bighorn has changed. Ten years after being deemed a villain, Sitting Bull was giving autographs. Custer has been seen variously as hero, villain, and buffoon. Little Bighorn was a way for the country to begin to understand the cost of westward expansion. The 1870s military defeat of Indians required a story of epic sacrifice against some of the bravest and most brilliant fighters any army had ever faced. Americans still

debate the meaning of Little Bighorn because they are still coming to grips with how the West was won. A timeline explores the representation of the battle in American culture over the 150 years after the battle.

- **Frozen in Time and Wild West:** With each advance in printing or movie technology came new styles and attitudes toward depicting the West and American Indians. But through it all Plains Indian imagery remained stuck in the past. The loss at Little Bighorn became the stuff of drama and spectacle. Buffalo Bill's Wild West stage show and its many copycats blurred the lines between entertainment and history. The performances often featured reenactments of the battle, advertised as "the great struggle of civilization and savagery, finally enabling our continental expansion." The shows were only the beginning. Colorful posters plastered towns and cities across the United States and Europe. Postcards, photographs, and dime novels enhanced the drama. Together the material and performances told a powerful story of a West that had been "won." The story shaped Americans' sense of history. It also appeared to justify America's expansion by holding up Plains Indians as worthy foes.

## **Section 5: Americans Explained**

This section is designed for visitor reflection and response. Visitors can engage with a video display where both Native and non-Native Americans share personal stories about their connections to Indian imagery. These connections span childhood memories, military service, and sporting events. The narratives evoke a range of emotions, from pride to ambivalence. Visitors have the opportunity to take part by filling in postcards with their own comments.

- **Why Are Indian Images Everywhere?** Americans are deeply connected to Indians. These connections are with us from our earliest childhood and follow us throughout our lives. Why do they matter? One reason we are so entangled with Indians is that Indians seem to represent all that is most authentically American. They have been a constant in the country since before it began. They never go away. And yet over the centuries our feelings about Indians have been all over the place. The images of Indians everywhere are reminders. Americans aren't quite ready to forget. We want to remember. We are still trying to make sense of a strange, complicated, and powerful history.
- **A New Way of Seeing:** The images of Indians that Americans see every day are linked to a new way of understanding a few familiar events: Thanksgiving was a modern invention. Pocahontas was a rich, powerful woman and a key figure in the country's founding. The Trail of Tears was a vast national project that reshaped the entire country. The Battle of Little Bighorn was the moment when, after killing more than 200 American soldiers, Indians became the country's unofficial mascots. Together these stories offer an optimistic and provocative way to understand American history and the American present. Like the Indians that appear everywhere, they give us the power to see into the country's deepest foundations. A concluding interactive offers visitors a chance to use a postcard to describe representations of Indians that are important in their lives and how that leads to reexamination of their perceptions of Native culture.