

The Quincentenary: Understanding America's Cultural Heritage

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This year is a special one throughout the Americas and indeed, throughout the world. The Columbus Quincentenary gives us an opportunity to examine our history and the ways the world has changed over the past 500 years. These changes have been momentous and have profoundly effected the natural environment, animal and plant species, the movements of populations, and the development of ideas and forms of social organization and cultural expression.

The U.S. Department of the Interior and the Smithsonian Institution think it is important that Americans understand their historical and cultural heritage. This heritage is complex, involving centuries of creativity, conflict, cooperation and cultural interchange across continents. Understanding our heritage is an important act of cultural citizenship, not only for Americans, but for people the world over. The Department of the Interior, through its many bureaus such as the National Park Service, and the Smithsonian, through its various museums and programs, have planned scores of activities to encourage public education so that in understanding our past we might more wisely chart our future.

The Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife, co-sponsored by the National Park Service, provides a dramatic venue for exploring our living cultural heritage. Here on the Nation's front lawn, millions of Americans can participate in cultural traditions that reach back centuries and

yet still provide meaning to contemporary communities and individuals. Visitors can talk to folks from my state, New Mexico, and discover how in the southwestern U.S., Native Americans, early Hispanic settlers and latter immigrants created a robust regional culture. Visitors can meet and speak with African-American Maroons who resisted plantation slavery and maintained free, self-reliant communities for hundreds of years. One can hear how contemporary Native American musicians from across the continent have adapted nontraditional instruments and styles in creating and re-creating their musical culture. And here at the Festival, you can also learn about the culture of the workers at the White House who serve, maintain and protect that historic landmark, instrument and symbol of government. You can, in short, meet with, speak to and be engaged by exemplary fellow Americans who forge the links between our cultural history and our cultural future.

I would also encourage you to go beyond the Mall, to the places, communities and national sites of these people and their forebearers. See the White House, visit historic Santa Fe, Chaco Culture National Historic Park and Fort Union National Monument in New Mexico, learn about African-American Seminoles, and experience the richness and variety of American Indian traditions through the numerous tribal museums and cultural centers across this country.