

A Confluence of Heritage on the National Watershed

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When the Smithsonian was founded 150 years ago, scientists typically broke down the natural world into fragments. Each scientist working in his own narrow and specialized field saw separate species, distinct climates, and individual geologic formations, all in virtual isolation from one another. Today, we tend to see creation as a whole, and to understand the natural world as comprised of ecosystems. We think in terms of such units as watersheds, which are formed by interrelationships among the rock, water, soil, plants, animals, climate, and people. The complex interrelationship between humans and their environment gives us a sense of place and a sense of community. Knowing where we are helps us develop a sense of who we are.

This year, the Festival of American Folklife celebrates three important cultural watersheds, and the ways in which people have sought, maintained, and preserved values and identities that grow from them.

The Festival joins with The Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games to present a program on the culture of the American South, here on the National Mall and back home in Atlanta, before a world audience, during the Olympic Games. The Olympics symbolize people from the world over coming together in common athletic and artistic purposes. Just as a watershed is fed by the confluence of numerous streams, so too does the culture of the South represent the confluence of Native American, African, and European traditions, joining together with a stream of visitors from around the globe.

Iowa, celebrating its sesquicentennial, is known as the land between the Mississippi and Missouri rivers, and symbolizes an important cultural watershed. For many, Iowa represents grassroots America, our heartland. The land and the rivers give Iowans a strong sense of purpose, and have nourished the value of community life as a centerpiece in our national consciousness.

The Smithsonian, which has grown into the world's foremost national scientific, historical, and artistic complex, represents yet another kind of cultural watershed. It collects aspects of America's heritage, documenting the ebb and flow of history over the years and across the nation, and encourages visitors to find themselves in its never-ending course.

The Festival itself, in its thirtieth year, illustrates how we, the people, can gather on our magnificent National Mall, amidst the great symbols of our free and democratic history, and annually reaffirm our sense of community by our presence and our witness. Through the Festival and our national parks, historic sites, monuments, and memorials we help visitors understand the historical and cultural tributaries from which our lives flow, and to which they inevitably return.