

Celebrating Thousands of Years in a Single Day

By Emily Grant

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Andrew Hunter picks up a rough, dull-colored clamshell, leans over a machine that looks like a cross between a power sander and a blowtorch, flips a switch, and disappears into a cloud of shell dust and smoke. When the dust settles, he reveals a now-lustrous purple-and-white shell to the crowd gathered around him. He explains that for centuries, American Indians on the East Coast have transformed shells like this one into wampum beads, which are woven into belts, capes, earrings, necklaces, and other items. Hunter, a member of the Meherrin tribe, uses wampum to craft beautiful, one-of-a-kind pieces of jewelry. He is just one of more than a hundred musicians, dancers, artists, storytellers, scholars, and elders who present at the N.C. Museum of History's annual American Indian Heritage Celebration.



North Carolina's American Indian population ranks eighth nationally and is the largest of any state east of the Mississippi River. Each November since 1996, the Museum of History, in partnership with the N.C. Commission of Indian Affairs, the Wake County Indian Education program, and the Triangle Native American Society, has hosted the American Indian Heritage Celebration. The goal is to build awareness of Indian history and culture through storytelling, craft demonstrations, hands-on activities, performances, and food. The celebration is the only free daylong family event in the state honoring North Carolina's Indian culture and is the museum's most popular annual event, attracting more than 7,000 visitors in 2004. All presenters are members of the eight state-recognized tribes: Coharie, Eastern Band of Cherokee, Haliwa-Saponi, Lumbee, Meherrin, Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation, Sappony, and Waccamaw-Siouan.

The year 2005 marked not only the tenth celebration at the museum but the twenty-fifth anniversary of American Indian Heritage Month in North Carolina and in the United States. The museum commemorated this special occasion in several ways: (1) displaying artist Freeman Owle's stone carving of the Cherokee creation during the month of November; (2) constructing and interpreting a traditional longhouse on the State Capitol grounds adjacent to the museum the week prior to the annual celebration, held in 2005 on November 19; and (3) opening an exhibit on powwows in North Carolina. The addition of these activities to an already-packed day of presentations equaled an event not to be missed. One of the strengths of the American Indian Heritage Celebration is the museum's commitment to working with and representing all of the state-recognized tribes. "What makes this event successful is the involvement of Indian people in the planning, organizing, and implementing of it," one presenter remarked. A planning committee made up of representatives from the eight state-recognized tribes, staff from the N.C. Commission of Indian Affairs, and museum employees evaluates and plans the celebration. The event includes presentations of historical information and traditions, as well as contemporary American Indian culture and arts.

The American Indian Heritage Celebration has evolved from a two-hour program for preregistered participants to an event serving thousands. In 2002 the museum expanded the celebration to include an Education Day for grades K–12 students. The day brings children from across the state together with American Indian artists and performers. Teachers whose groups are signed up also receive curriculum-based activities for their classrooms. As with the public event, American Indian Education Day has grown. It now operates at capacity—hosting approximately 2,000 students.

So what are you waiting for? Mark your calendars for the next American Indian Heritage Celebration. Don't miss the chance to experience 10,000 years of history in one day. Watch the museum's Web site at <http://ncmuseumofhistory.org> for details on future celebrations.

Emily Grant serves as the youth programs coordinator for the N.C. Museum of History. She works with the rest of the planning committee to oversee the annual American Indian Heritage Celebration.