Missouri joined the Union as the 24th state on August 10, 1821. We are fast approaching its bicentennial anniversary, in which statewide events and activities are planned to showcase our state’s history, geography, and culture in recognition of the occasion. Yet, as we prepare to commemorate this milestone—and look back at 200 years of statehood—we should ask ourselves: Whose statehood are we celebrating?

In 1819, an application was submitted to the U.S. Congress by Missouri’s Territorial Legislature lamenting the continued denial of Missourians’ full rights as American citizens due to Missouri’s continued status as a territory. They hoped “that their sufferings [might] soon have an end” and asked for the territory to be admitted into the Union, thus granting them the full “rights, privileges, and immunities belonging to citizens of the United States.” The petitioners claimed the application was “in the name and behalf of the people of said Territory.” In 2019, we understand that this did not mean all of the people living in said territory.

In the 17th century, Missouri was dominated by the Osage tribe, who inhabited the region along with various Siouan-speaking peoples, such as the Oros, Iowas, Quapaws, and Missouris. Situated at the crossroads of the Missouri, Ohio, and Mississippi rivers, neighboring tribes like the Kaskaskias, Cahokias, Peorias, Sac and Fox, Shawnees, Kickapoos, and Miamis, were constantly

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Whose Bicentennial Are We Celebrating, Anyway?

Sacred Sun and her child, around 1830. Sacred Sun was a very famous Osage woman who is estimated to have lived approximately 1809–1836. Image from the McKeeney and Hall Indian Tribes of North America Collection, University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, MAH051. Identified as Sacred Sun and her child by the State Historical Society of Missouri (SHS 021180)
moving in and out of the area. When Europeans arrived, the region was comprised of many populous villages and an extensive and complex trading system up and down the rivers.

The first European settlement, Ste. Geneviève, was established in 1673, and European migration to the region began. Violence and skirmishes broke out between settlers and Native Americans, but European settlement was still sparse, and the fur trade kept the two groups in cohabitation. Throughout the next century, native tribes maintained their autonomy by playing the European colonial sides against each other in the French–English conflict as well as in trade. As the Missouri confluence region passed from French to Spanish and back to French hands, it made little difference to Native American life until the incorporation of Missouri into the United States.

Still a young nation, the United States was looking to expand and secure its borders. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 put in place a system that was meant to ensure the addition of new lands and states into the nation was orderly. According to the ordinance, regions were first incorporated as territories. Those living in a territory were under the governance of the U.S. but did not benefit from the provisions of the constitution. A territory was granted more autonomy as its white population grew. But as long as a region remained in territorial status, their officers and officials were appointed by the President and they had no voting delegate in the House of Representatives. However, if a territory’s white population grew to reach 60,000, the territory became eligible to apply for statehood. Land incentives were used to entice white settlers to new territories and move the region along the process of the ordinance. Statehood represented full inclusion in the U.S., along with all the social and economic

We Celebrating, Anyway?

Depiction of the Treaty of Fort Clark from a mural in Missouri State Capitol.
benefits that afforded. Citizens of a state had self-government and full and equal representation in the federal government.

Missouri became an American territory in 1803, and an influx of white settlers arrived in the region. More land was needed for the new migrants, so the increasingly powerful U.S. government began pressuring native nations like the Osage to sell their land. American officials used the threat of military action and the continued tide of white settlers streaming across the Missouri River to “persuade” unwilling tribes, who rarely received a fair price for the land they sold.

In 1808, Meriwether Lewis, then the Governor of the Louisiana Territory, issued a summons for all the Osage to move near Fort Clark. The subsequent treaty, known as the Treaty of Fort Clark, forced the Osage to relinquish 52.5 million acres of land in Arkansas and Missouri in exchange for $1,200 in cash and $1,500 in merchandise. Additional treaties followed in which Missouri’s Territorial Governor, William Clark, arranged for the United States to purchase Missouri from the Osage, thus fully removing the Osage from their homelands.

At the start of the statehood process in 1820, Missouri had an estimated population of only 4,500 American Indians. The population of white settlers had reached 54,903 and was rapidly expanding. Through the mechanisms of statehood, the U.S. government created a system that gave it the power to socially engineer populations by moving and controlling specific demographics as the nation expanded its borders, placing white settlers as the dominant racial group in future states.

The majority of Missouri’s native inhabitants relocated to what is now southern Kansas—until 1872, when the U.S. government coerced them to sell their land again. The Civil War had just ended, and another great migration of white settlers was moving west in search of “available” land. Native tribes were once again relocated to new lands farther west. These repeated forced removals left American Indians in a state of cultural decay. Far away from their sacred homelands, many tribes no longer practiced the traditions of their ancestors.

Throughout American expansion, “statehood” has had different meanings for the many different groups living within the country. For white settlers, statehood meant the right to self-government, but for Missouri’s native tribes, statehood meant displacement, cultural decay, and further marginalization. The relocation and removal of specific races as a process of statehood codified a national structure of racial hierarchies in which, today, American Indians remain at the bottom. If Missourians today do not recognize and understand this history, they contribute—willfully or otherwise—to the historic structures of racism and abuse from which our state was formed.

As the bicentennial draws nearer, we must reevaluate Missouri’s history through the experience of its native peoples. Any bicentennial commemoration will be inadequate if it does not accurately remember that past and work to atone for the injustices which occurred. The year 2021 offers a platform to showcase the different histories and heritages that comprise our communities. We should not miss this opportunity to recognize and represent the historically marginalized members of our state in bicentennial activities—including African Americans and women of all demographics. Let’s create a space for all Missourians to come together (an opportunity which many of the bicentennial celebrations of older states have conspicuously avoided) and open the door for all of us to envision a better future. Only then can we celebrate a statehood that is meant for everyone.