Special Section Commemorating The Indian Citizenship Act of 1924

Foreword

In my family, voting is a tradition. My mother took me to the voting booth every year as she filled out her ballot and emphasized the importance of having a say in who represents us. Now, I take my daughter with me when I vote in federal, state, local, and tribal elections, so she knows that this is one way that we, as Native people, can say we are still here, and our voices matter.

The centennial anniversary of the Indian Citizenship Act is a reminder for all of us that the systems in which we operate today were not built by or for Native people – but rather, to erase and eliminate us. For far too long, Native people had no say in the government that dictated nearly every aspect of our lives, and gaining citizenship required giving up tribal citizenship and assimilating into American culture. This is only one piece of the long, traumatic history of erasing Indigenous identity.

We have come a long way in building strong relationships with the sovereign Tribes that share geography with Minnesota and the United States, but we still have further to go. It has only been one hundred years since Congress extended US citizenship to Native people, recognizing the original people of these lands as citizens of the United States. And now I am proud to be an Ojibwe woman wherever I go – in the community, in the halls of the Minnesota State Capitol, and in the voting booth, and proud Native people now have a say in decisions made about us, without giving up our identity or tribal citizenship.

Peggy Flanagan is Minnesota's 50th Lieutenant Governor, an enrolled member of the White Earth Band of Ojibwe, and currently the highest-ranking Native woman elected to executive office in the country.

On June 2, 1924 President Calvin Coolidge signed the Indian Citizenship Act which declared all non-citizen Indians born within the territorial limits of the United States to be citizens. The Act authorized the Secretary of Interior to issue certificates of citizenship to Native Americans.

The Indian Citizenship Act was, in part, a response to recognize the thousands of Native Americans who served in the armed forces during the First World War.

However, despite the enactment of the law, citizenship was not a guarantee for Native Americans. The law included a provision that citizenship could be denied if it might, "impair or otherwise affect the right of any Indian to tribal or other property."

Nearly two decades after the Indian Citizenship Act was passed, Congress saw a need to reaffirm and extend citizenship rights to Indigenous peoples through the Nationality Act of 1940.



Timeline of Native American Citizenship

1776	Declaration of Independence signed
1788	U.S. Constitution enacted
1831	Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek was ratified, allowing Mississippi Choctaw to become citizens
1857	Supreme Court ruling in <i>Dred Scott v. Sandford</i> said Native people could become citizens through naturalization
1868	the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution declared all persons "born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof" were citizens; the "jurisdiction" requirement was interpreted to exclude most Native Americans
1870	Civil Rights Act of 1866 was ratified by Congress repeating the exclusion of Native Americans from citizenship based on birth location
1884	Supreme Court ruling in Elk v. Wilkins reaffirmed the exclusion of Native people from U.S. citizenship
1887	Dawes Act passed by Congress granting American citizenship to all Native Americans who accepted individual land grants under the provisions of statutes and treaties
1924	Indian Citizenship Act was passed by Congress granting birthright citizenship with exceptions
1940	Nationality Act was passed by Congress reaffirming Native people's birthright citizenship

"...The bill as passed automatically make every Indian born within the territorial limits of the United States a full citizen.

"The bill is just what the Indians of the Red Lake reservation have been fighting for,"

said Edward L. Rogers, County Attorney of Cass county and member of the tribe, and president of the General Council of Minnesota Chippewas, It only gives them the right to vote, however, and does not affect government allotments or rights to tribal funds..."

The Tomahawk - June 5, 1924



"Approximately 125,000 Indians have thus been given citizenship. It is estimated that 200,000 Indians were previously made citizens by various acts of Congress.

While the Indians have all finally achieved citizenship in the land owned by their forefathers before the white man's foot had found their soil, the restrictions on the lands of the Indians has not been changed".



"...Up to the time of the adoption of the citizenship measure by congress probably not over forty-five per cent of the Indians of the United States had gone through the regular naturalization process and been granted citizenship papers. Many, no doubt, in places where they were known, were granted the right of franchise without question as to their citizenship, because election boards have been a little slow in refusing to give ballots to the 'first Americans'...."

Windom Reporter reprinting from the Pipestone Star



"...The proposed act will throw down the present bars that have prevented many Indians from becoming citizens and open the way to them by making application to the Secretary of the Interior and procuring a certificate.

In explaining why there are 125,000 Indians that are not citizens Commissioner [of Indian Affairs] Burke stated that under the present law they could not achieve citizenship unless they left their reservations, separated themselves from their tribes and took on themselves the habits and mode of living of white people..."



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"...The effect of the bill and the real status of the Indian can, however, be tested at once. He is now supposed to have every right of an American citizen.

Let him claim the right which all citizens are presumed to exercise - the right to go to the polls and cast his ballot. Let him, therefore, fulfill at once the voting requirements of the state in which he is a resident. Let him register, get his name on the polling list, and then use the power of the ballot to effect his salvation and the best welfare of the community..."

The Tomahawk - July 10, 1924



"...An important fact in this connection is that you have the right to vote at the elections in your State under the same conditions as other residents of the State. Having this undisputed right you should inform yourselves as to the election laws of the States that you may have a full understanding in this matter.

Your special attention is directed to the general election that is to be held in November of this year, about three months from now, at which time a President and Vice President of the United States and many other officers are to be elected.

Very sincerely yours, P.R. WADSWORTH Superintendent. [of the Consolidated Chippewa Agency, Cass Lake]"

The Tomahawk - August 21, 1924

