

# Acknowledging NATIVE HISTORY IN MISSOURI

MOLLY TOVAR

DIRECTOR, KATHRYN M. BUDER CENTER FOR AMERICAN INDIAN STUDIES  
PROFESSOR OF PRACTICE, BROWN SCHOOL AT WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS  
& CHRIS LEIKER

LEAD PUBLICATIONS EDITOR, CENTER FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT,  
BROWN SCHOOL AT WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

*Take what you please for my  
Grand Father since you ask me  
for it.... I have done all that you  
have asked... I give almost all  
my land to my Great Father.*

—PAWHUSKA, CHIEF OF THE  
GREAT OSAGES, NOVEMBER 10, 1808

On an autumn day in 1808, elders of the Osage Nation gathered at Fort Clark, a new outpost overlooking the Missouri River near what is now Sibley, Missouri. The council assembled to consider a treaty with the young American republic, a treaty requiring them to give up over 52 million acres of Osage land east of the fort.

The treaty was proffered with a threat: sign or become enemies of the United States.

Earlier in 1808, Osage interactions with encroaching settlers prompted Meriwether Lewis to act. Then the governor of the Louisiana Territory, Lewis encouraged neighboring nations to “wage war against [the Osage]... to cut them off completely or drive them from their country.” The prospect of war certainly colored the council’s deliberations on the treaty.

Over 100 elders signed it, ceding most of what is now Missouri and half of what would become Arkansas. In exchange, the Osage received the promise of the republic’s protection, \$1,200 in cash, and merchandise of similar value. The compensation amounted to .005¢ per acre. In accepting the terms, the Osage evaded annihilation by consenting to removal. Similar treaties were presented to the Missouria, the Oto, and other peoples, with the same result.

## ACKNOWLEDGING HISTORY, ACKNOWLEDGING LOSS

In Canada, Australia, and elsewhere, institutions routinely open public events with indigenous acknowledgment statements. “The purpose of these statements,” wrote Delilah Friedler in *Teen Vogue*, “is to show respect for indigenous peoples and recognize their enduring relationship to the land. Practicing acknowledgment can also raise awareness about histories that are often suppressed or forgotten.” The Australian Parliament starts each workday with an acknowledgment. Northwestern University, the University of Washington, and Arizona State University have issued formal acknowledgments.

This fall, some 210 years after the 1808 Osage treaty, the Brown School at Washington University began encouraging organizers to open public events by reading a short acknowledgment. The campus sits on land ceded in the treaty, and the effort recognizes that the university community, as the beneficiary of land acquisition, bears responsibility for preserving this history and acknowledging harms. The effort is designed to familiarize the community and visitors with Missouri’s indigenous peoples, their cultures, and a history that reaches ten millennia into the past.

Although organizers are free to craft their own language or to forgo acknowledgment, sample statements are available. The school has asked the university’s chancellor to encourage such statements at the start of all on-campus events.

## SAMPLE STATEMENTS FOR NATIVE ACKNOWLEDGMENT

1. “[Organization name] acknowledges that it is located on the ancestral lands of Native peoples who were removed unjustly and that this community is the beneficiary. We honor our heritage of Native peoples and what they teach us about stewardship of the earth.”
2. “We would like to acknowledge that [organization name] is located on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Illini Confederacy. We thank the Illini people for their hospitality and support of our work.”
3. “The process of knowing and acknowledging the ground beneath our feet is a way of honoring and expressing gratitude for the people on this land before us. It familiarizes visitors with the cultures and histories of Missouri’s indigenous tribes as well as with their ties in the St. Louis region.”
4. “I’d like to get started by acknowledging the indigenous culture of Missouri.”
5. “We acknowledge that we are on the traditional lands of the Illini people.”
6. “I would like to acknowledge that this meeting is being held on the traditional lands of the Illini people and pay my respect to elders both past and present.”
7. “I want to respectfully acknowledge the Illini people, who have stewarded this land throughout the generations.”
8. “We would like to begin by acknowledging that the land on which we gather is the occupied/ unceded/seized territory of the Illini people.”
9. “I would like to begin by acknowledging that we are in St. Louis, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Illini people.”

## HISTORY’S WEIGHT

Histories typically omit or downplay the seizure of Native lands and attending harms, but ancestral ties persist, and the losses remain vivid in the hearts of Native peoples.

In 2009, the Osage Nation purchased the last of the once numerous prehistoric Native structures that gave St. Louis the nickname Mound City. Captured by *Osage News*, the comments of then-Chief John Gray illustrate the impetus for acknowledging Native history in Missouri: “Hundreds of years of the Osage people’s past have simply been erased from the landscape.... There is nothing we can do to bring back what was destroyed... but the Nation can impact what happens to Sugarloaf Mound today and can help educate Osages and the citizens of St. Louis about us and where they live.”



LEFT: Sketch of Chief White Hair (Gilcrease Museum). ABOVE: Hillman Hall (Brown School, Washington University)