



THE HISTORY OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN FORT COLLINS, COLORADO

Native American Rights and the American Indian Movement in Fort Collins

(1968–1978)



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Cover: National Indian Youth Council demonstrations, Bureau of Indian Affairs office, Denver, Colorado, 1970 (Denver Public Library)

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STATEMENT OF CONTEXT

This document is part of the *Fort Collins Civil Rights Movement Historic Context Study*. Based on the National Park Service (NPS) thematic framework *Civil Rights in America: A Framework for Identifying Significant Sites* and associated theme studies, this historic context narrative focuses on the experiences and activism of Native peoples in Fort Collins. It covers the period from 1968, when the American Indian Movement (AIM) was founded, to 1978, when the Longest Walk march successfully influenced federal legislation regarding Native rights. This historic context narrative examines the American Indian Movement in Colorado and Fort Collins.

Both NPS and the City of Fort Collins have focused theme studies about Native people primarily on pre-European contact and early colonial history in the Eastern part of the U.S. NPS theme studies are limited to *The Earliest Americans Theme Study for the Eastern United States*, which covers Paleoindian life in the Northeast, Southeast, and Midwest United States, and *Historic Contact: Early Relations between Indian Peoples and Colonists in Northeastern North America 1524–1783*. The City of Fort Collins has, to date, published one historic context narrative, *People of the Poudre: An Ethnohistory of the Cache de Poudre River National Heritage Area (1500–1880)*.

This historic context is limited to the civil rights activism of AIM during its period of greatest activity. Although the archival record indicates that people from Fort Collins who may have participated in AIM meetings and activities likely would have traveled to Denver to do so, future information shared by community members may reveal instances of local activism.

THE AMERICAN INDIAN MOVEMENT

The following information is derived from the following sources:

- “American Indian Movement,” Civil Rights Digital History Project, University of Georgia, online at <https://digilab.libs.uga.edu/exhibits/exhibits/show/civil-rights-digital-history-p/american-indian-movement>.
- “*United States v. Banks and Means (Wounded Knee)*,” Center for Constitutional Rights, online at <https://ccrjustice.org/home/what-we-do/our-cases/united-states-v-banks-and-means-wounded-knee>.
- Laura Watterman Wittstock and Elaine J. Salinas, “A Brief History of the American Indian Movement,” AIM website, online at <http://www.aimovement.org/ggc/history.html>.

The American Indian Movement (AIM) was founded in Minneapolis, Minnesota, following a meeting in Summer 1968 called by a group of Native American community activists to discuss issues affecting Native peoples in the United States. The U.S. government had spent more than a century reneging on treaties, seizing Native lands, and forcibly removing Native Americans from their historical territories; inflicting violence against Native peoples, including massacres of unarmed women and children at places like Sand Creek and Wounded Knee; kidnapping and imprisoning Native children in boarding schools; attempting to force Native Americans to give up their culture, language, and traditions in exchange for citizenship; and generally discriminating against and denying voting and other civil rights to Native peoples. Federal policy, state and federal legislation, and judicial actions solidified the second-class status of Native people in the United States and contributed to high levels of unemployment, substandard housing, and poor health outcomes for Native Americans living on reservations and in urban areas. Locally, Native people were frequently subjected to police harassment and brutality.

At the meeting in Minneapolis, several hundred people gathered to hear young Native activists George Mitchell, Dennis Banks, and Clyde Bellecourt (all Ojibwe) speak on these issues, as well as local problems such as police harassment. The three men and others subsequently formed the American Indian Movement organization, with the goals of forcing the U.S. government to recognize and uphold its treaties and Native Americans’ sovereignty, as well as take steps to protect the civil liberties of Native peoples.

Significant events in AIM’s history include:

- Participating in the occupation of significant sites, including Alcatraz Island (1969), the replica ship *Mayflower* in Boston (1970), and Mount Rushmore (1971).
- Conducting a successful 1972 publicity campaign to advocate for justice following the murder of a Sioux man named Yellow Thunder by a group of White men on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota.
- Holding the 1972 “Trail of Broken Treaties” protest march on Washington, D.C., following which AIM members occupied offices of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in protest of its policies and with demands for its reform. AIM representatives presented a 20-point manifesto to federal lawmakers, seeking sovereignty for Native American nations, the resumption of treaty-making, and the abolishing of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, among other demands.¹



Figure 1. AIM activists occupy Alcatraz Island (AP, 1969)

- Occupying the town of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, from February 27–May 8, 1973, an action led by AIM leader Russell Means in protest of the conservative (and allegedly corrupt) leadership of the Pine Ridge Reservation. During the occupation, the FBI attempted to remove the protestors, resulting in a standoff that left two dead, 12 wounded, and 1200 people arrested. The federal government then brought a case against Russell Means and Dennis Banks, but the AIM leaders were acquitted of wrongdoing; the chief judge in the case dismissed the charges on the grounds of insufficient evidence and government misconduct by the FBI.
- On March 10, 1973, a protest that began near AIM’s Denver headquarters in support of events at Wounded Knee resulted in 14 arrests. The march began near East Colfax Avenue and was moving toward the state capitol building when arrests were made. The march was intended to celebrate the removal of federal roadblocks at Wounded Knee; AIM spokesperson Vince Harrier stated that the group did not officially support the march.²

Like other non-White/Anglo civil rights and political organizations and associated individuals, AIM was targeted by the FBI as part of its secret Counter Intelligence Program (aka COINTELPRO, 1956–1971). COINTELPRO was originally created to focus on the American Communist Party but quickly expanded its scope to include any group it considered “subversive.” Its tactics included everything from spreading disinformation to assassinating perceived “enemies”.

AIM was focused on bringing attention to Native rights issues, but it also invested in providing educational opportunities and advocating for Native education. Based on AIM advocacy, the Minnesota legislature passed the Native American Language and Culture Education Act in 1977; this established educational programming to reinforce a positive representation of Native Americans in school curricula and to support the preservation and continuation of their language and culture.³

In 1978, AIM carried a sacred pipe more than 3,200 miles on the “Longest Walk,” a protest that succeeded in preventing the passage of federal legislation that would have severely restricted Native Americans’ hunting and fishing rights, limit Native schools and hospitals, and reduce the legal rights of Native tribes.

AIM continued to be active in Colorado. In October 2000, 147 people, including Russell Means, were arrested in Denver while peacefully protesting and temporarily stopping the city’s Columbus Day parade. Means vowed to protest the following year, and local AIM leaders stated that they would pursue legislation to abolish Columbus Day in the state.⁴ In 2020, the Colorado Legislature replaced Columbus Day with Frances Xavier Cabrini Day as a legal state holiday on the first Monday in October.⁵ AIM Colorado began campaigning to remove Columbus Day in the state in 1989.⁶



Figure 2. Native American women protest in support of Wounded Knee, February, 1974 (National Guardian Photographs; PHOTOS 213; box 9; folder 26; Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University)

OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

Regional offices of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) were located in Denver, Colorado, which became the main location of Native American activism in the state during the 1960s and 1970s.

In November 1967, the Tribal Indian Land Rights Association (TILRA) announced that it would picket the BLM Denver office, in protest of federal policies related to Native American claims on land managed by the Bureau.⁷ TILRA, headquartered in Denver at that time, protested on behalf of Native American land issues nationally; in 1970, the group responded to a report released by a federal agency, the Public Land Law Review Commission, stating that the report's contents ignored the land rights of every Native American alive and calling the report "White racism in action."⁸

In January 1971, 10 members of the Concerned American Indians of Denver presented a list of demands to the director of the BIA Denver office, including protecting fishing rights for Native Americans in Washington state; requesting that all top officials in the Department of Education pertaining to tribal peoples be Native American; and demanding that AIM "be immediately installed as subcontractors of the Field Employment Assistance Office of the BIA." The group planned to occupy the office until its demands were met.⁹



Figure 3. 1970 protest at the Bureau of Indian Affairs office in Denver, Colorado (Denver Post)

NATIVE ACTIVISM IN FORT COLLINS

Native American civil rights activities in Fort Collins are associated with Colorado State University (CSU) from 1971 through at least 1975.

By April 1971, AIM, along with CSU's Black Student Alliance (BSA) and the United Mexican American Students (UMAS), formed the Third World Coalition, demanding changes in what it viewed as discriminatory policies on campus. The group presented the university with a list of 16 demands focused on what it saw as the "racist policy" of CSU's administration.¹⁰ CSU President A. R. Chamberlain responded with a paper answering the specific demands of the coalition, stating that faculty and staff shared many of the group's concerns.¹¹

At the beginning of the fall semester that year, in September 1971, members of CSU's Anthropology Department removed human bones from the Roberts Ranch in Livermore. Members of the AIM chapter in Denver, including Vernon Bellecourt,¹² believed the bones to be those of their ancestors; after being allowed to view the bones, AIM members removed some of the bones and other materials from their storage location in the Department.¹³ AIM representatives met with CSU faculty shortly after the incident, returning some materials and presenting a list of requests. Ten members of AIM, led by Denver chapter director Vernon Bellecourt, walked out of the meeting after CSU Anthropology professor Daniel Ogden refused to retract his statement calling AIM's removal of the bones a "cheap publicity stunt" and also questioned AIM's motives. Among its demands, AIM requested that CSU give them all of the Native American bones in the university's possession, stop current archaeological excavations at Native sites, and allow the group to act as a "watchdog" over future excavations.¹⁴ AIM also tried to serve CSU faculty with "citizen's arrest" forms but were unsuccessful. Anthropology Department chair Robert Theodoratus stated that the bones taken by AIM included "a cow skull, the skulls of a Chinese and a Negro, plus assorted bones of Whites — a lot of them from India, which were purchased for teaching material."¹⁵

This type of activism eventually led to the adoption of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990, which created a process by which federal agencies and museums that receive federal funds are to return human remains and artifacts to Native tribes and lineal descendants.¹⁶ Today, Colorado State University has reported being in possession of the remains of 79 Native individuals and has made all of those available for repatriation. Seventeen of those sets of remains are from Larimer County.¹⁷



Figure 4. AIM members remove bones from the CSU Anthropology lab in 1971 (Fort Collins Coloradoan)

In March 1973, a local group called “People for Wounded Knee” sponsored a rally on the West lawn of the CSU Student Center, collecting food and money for the Native Americans involved in the occupation.¹⁸ The Denver regional director of AIM, Jess Large, a Shoshone-Arapahoe from the Wind River Reservation, speaking to 200 attendees, predicted that federal marshals would move into Wounded Knee within days. Large charged the crowd with getting “the truth across to the people on this campus and in this town” about Native Americans and called for sovereign nations on all reservations.¹⁹ Nine people from Fort Collins transported the collected food to South Dakota, moving it across the mountains on horseback because roads were blocked by the federal government. They made it as far as Porcupine, South Dakota, seven miles from Wounded Knee, before voluntarily leaving the state after a marshal told them he had orders from the Attorney General to clear the area.²⁰

CSU brought several Native speakers to campus during the 1970s. For instance, in Summer 1974, CSU’s Anthropology Department offered a course entitled “Native Americans Today: Native American Viewpoints,” taught by Calvin Dupree, a Sioux who grew up on the Cheyenne Indian Reservation in South Dakota.²¹ In 1975, Chick Ramirez, a Yaqui who previously had been involved in TILRA and served as the director of the Denver chapter of AIM, spoke at CSU on “The Native American Today.” In 1969, Ramirez had been selected by TILRA to represent them on a presidential advisory board on Indian affairs.²²

The City of Fort Collins officially began to recognize Indigenous Peoples Day instead of Columbus Day in 2022.²³

ASSOCIATED PROPERTY TYPES

“Associated property type” is a technical term used by NPS to describe historic resources that are related to the theme, geographic location, and time period for a particular theme study or historic context. This historic context identifies resources that could be nominated to the NRHP at the state or local level. Please refer to *National Register Bulletin 15: How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation* for more information.

All historic sites associated with this context, if nominated to the NRHP, would be proposed under Criterion A: “Association with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history” at the local level of significance.

A building must also retain its historical and architectural integrity; in other words, it “must physically represent the time period for which it is significant.” Integrity is evaluated on the basis of seven aspects: location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association. For example, the substantial interior and exterior changes made to the Grant Avenue Presbyterian Church/LULAC Hall, in order to convert it to condominiums, have erased its integrity of design, materials, workmanship, and feeling. It only retains integrity of location, setting, and association, and the building is no longer identifiable as a church. It would not, therefore, be eligible for nomination to the NRHP.

Although eligibility for listing in the NRHP is generally limited to those resources whose period of significance ends more than 50 years ago, as all resources associated with the ongoing struggle for voting rights are identified, their data should be collected so that they can be nominated as they become eligible.

The resource types listed here and individually significant sites identified elsewhere were located through archival and historical research and/or information provided by individuals in the community. Property types identified in this historic context include those associated with:

- Interpreting AIM’s organizational activities in Fort Collins.
- Individuals living in Fort Collins who held leadership positions in the American Indian Movement at the national or state level.

PROPERTY TYPE: SITE

The west lawn of the CSU Student Center is associated with AIM’s 1973 occupation of Wounded Knee and the support that AIM received during that event.

PROPERTY TYPE: COLLEGE

The Anthropology Department at CSU was the site of AIM activity in 1971, when the group attempted to remove bones, believed to be those of Native Americans, which had been excavated from a nearby ranch.

SITES TO BE PRIORITIZED FOR SURVEY

All historic resources identified during this project have been compiled in a single inventory spreadsheet, whether extant or not. The following historic properties have been confirmed to be extant and potentially significant at the local level under Criterion A.

1101 Center Avenue Mall – West Lawn CSU Student Services Center



301 University Avenue – Social Sciences Building



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