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National Museum of the American Indian Launches Its Collections Online

Today the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian launched its collections online. The ever-expanding digital access to the museum's 800,000-plus items includes more than 5,500 photographs; eventually it will be one of the largest Native American online collections. It is available at www.AmericanIndian.si.edu/searchcollections.

The launch is a milestone in the museum's "Fourth Museum" project to bring the collections to those who may not have the opportunity to visit the museum's three buildings in New York City, Suitland, Md., and Washington, D.C. The launch is also in keeping with Smithsonian Secretary Wayne Clough's strategic planning initiative to serve the Smithsonian's growing number of virtual visitors and fulfill its mission to increase and diffuse knowledge.

"As the museum on the National Mall approaches its fifth anniversary (Sept. 21), our promise to reach out to tribal communities, schools, libraries, museums, indeed to all throughout the world is being realized," said Kevin Gover (Pawnee/Comanche), director of the museum. "Though we have a long way to go before completing this project, I am pleased to offer the first phase of our fourth museum—our museum without walls." The goal of the project is to include as many items as possible on the Web. As staff research is completed, items will be published online.

During the course of the project, curators unearthed new evidence about the collections' origins. Though George Gustav Heye (1874-1957) is often credited with building the museum's collections (approximately 85% were acquired during his lifetime), thousands of previously unidentified individuals including farmers, missionaries, soldiers and teachers contributed. Their stories provide fascinating details behind the objects and open up new research possibilities for investigating the relationships between Native and non-Native people and the political, economic and social histories throughout the Western Hemisphere.

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