

Abigail Rios

SOC147 Our America

The National Museum of the American Indian Reflection Paper

Stepping into the National Museum of the American Indian was a transformative experience, one that challenged my preconceptions and broadened my understanding of Indigenous cultures and histories. This museum is located in Lower Manhattan, right in the ancestral homelands of the Lenape people, who were a group of Native American tribes. Having the museum located there gives Indigenous people a platform to reclaim their stories and culture while challenging the European narrative.

One noteworthy aspect of the National Museum of the American Indian is that it is situated within the Alexander Hamilton U.S. Custom House. Previously, the Custom House was a symbol of America's economic and political might. By transforming the building into a museum dedicated to Native American history and culture, the museum is challenging the mainly European narrative of American history and giving Indigenous people a platform to reclaim their stories and traditions.

The entire museum was truly amazing, however, I enjoyed reading about the Poospatuck people of Long Island and their wampum belts. To my findings, Wampum is made from shells and it played a significant role in the culture and economy of many Native American communities along the East Coast. As the museum describes it, it was more than just shells, it was used as an agreement, an invitation, a promise, an ornament, and even a way to heal. The exhibition did a wonderful job of showcasing the tools and techniques used to make some of their intricate wampum belts. I learned that although they were called wampum “belts,” they

weren't actually used as belts.

I must say, as I walked through the museum, I was struck by the lack of representation of indigenous people among the staff. While the staff was diverse in their backgrounds and experiences, I did not see any staff members who were indigenous themselves or who represented the various indigenous communities showcased in the museum's exhibits. It's disappointing because having indigenous staff members would have provided visitors with a more authentic and engaging experience.

Overall it was an eye-opening experience that exposed me to many aspects of Native American history and culture that I was not previously aware of. One thing that particularly stood out to me was how the English came and took over indigenous land, which I learned more about during my visit. It was fascinating and challenging to learn about how the land was taken from the indigenous people, and the tactics used to do so. For example, I was surprised to learn that the natives were allegedly offered \$24 to pay for Manhattan, which may or may not be a myth.

After visiting the museum, I left with a greater appreciation for the resilience and strength of Native American communities. The exhibits and artifacts on display served as a reminder of the deep history and connection to the land that indigenous peoples have. It also reiterated what I had learned back in high school, that the British invaded and stole the land from the Native Indians. It was humbling to be able to hear their stories and see their artifacts up close and reflect on how much history has been lost or misconstrued over the years.