

Gladys Tantaquidgeon

1899-2005 | Medicine Woman & Cultural Preservationist

Gladys Tantaquidgeon spent her life protecting and preserving the history and traditions of Native and Indigenous people. Gladys was directly related to Uncas, a famous Mohegan leader from the 1600s. She was born on the Mohegan reservation in Uncasville, Connecticut in 1899. At that time, the United States government had done a lot to destroy traditional Native lifestyles and take away lands that had been the homes to Native tribes for centuries.

At age 5, Gladys began learning about Mohegan history, medicine, and religion from older women in her community. She went to local schools on and off as a child. When she was 20, she started college at the University of Pennsylvania.

She studied anthropology (the study of people—their language, culture, biology, and societies.) After college, Gladys was hired by the United States government to work on the Yankton Sioux reservation in South Dakota. She studied Native art and saw that it was a good way for tribes to preserve their culture and their individual identities. She helped Native communities set up artist cooperatives (groups where artists work together to learn from each other and help promote and sell their artwork.)



Gladys Tantaquidgeon, courtesy National Museum of the American Indian



Gladys Tantaquidgeon with her brother Harold,
courtesy Tantaquidgeon Museum

In 1942, Gladys published a book about Native medicine. In 1947, she returned to Uncasville. She became the curator of the Tantaquidgeon Indian Museum, which she started along with her father and brother. It is the oldest Native-owned and operated museum in the United States.

Gladys worked hard to preserve the history of the Mohegan people. She saved the records of many marriages, births, deaths, and graduations. These helped the Mohegan Tribe when they applied to the United States government for federal recognition in 1994. Most tribal groups that apply for federal recognition are not successful, but the Mohegan Tribe was.

Yale University and the University of Connecticut awarded special honors to Gladys, and she is in the Connecticut Women's Hall of Fame. Unlike most people, she lived through three centuries—the 1800s, 1900s, and 2000s. She died at the age of 106 after a lifetime of helping people throughout the country see the importance of Native history and culture.

For more information, visit:

<https://connecticuthistory.org/gladys-tantaquidgeon-preserves-the-states-native-past/>

<https://www.cwhf.org/inductees/gladys-tantaquidgeon>

<https://www.mohegan.nsn.us/explore/heritage/memorial/medicine-woman-gladys-tantaquidgeon-memorial>

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