



WORLD

Irish people send donations to Native Americans, returning a Great Famine-era favor

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Irish people are donating money to Native American communities grappling with the coronavirus pandemic to repay assistance one tribe gave during the Great Famine in Ireland more than a century ago.

In 1847, members of the Choctaw Nation provided \$170, which would be roughly \$5,000 today, of relief aid to the Irish during the famine, not long after thousands of Native Americans died from starvation and disease while being forced to move west on the Trail of Tears. The organizers of a GoFundMe campaign raising money for the Navajo Nation and Hopi Reservation said Sunday that several recent donations were inspired by the 173-year-old act of kindness.

"The death of many people on the Trail of Tears sparked empathy for the Irish people in their time of need," organizer Vanessa Tulley wrote. "Acts of kindness from indigenous ancestors passed being reciprocated nearly 200 years later through blood memory and interconnectedness. Thank you, IRELAND, for showing solidarity and being here for us."

As of Monday, the Navajo Nation reported 73 deaths and 2,474 positive coronavirus cases. Twenty-eight members of the Hopi tribe had tested positive for COVID-19 at the Hopi Health Care Center as of Monday.

President Donald Trump announced Tuesday during a visit to Phoenix that the Navajo Nation will receive more than \$600 million and the Gila River Indian Community will receive \$40 million in initial CARES Act funds to battle the effects of the coronavirus.

COVID-19 aid: Trump says Navajo Nation will get more than \$600 million

The campaign has raised more than \$3.1 million, which will be given to the Rural Utah Project Education Fund to help buy groceries, water, supplies and fabric to make masks for high-risk people. Irish people had donated about half a million dollars so far, organizer Ethel Branch told CNN on Tuesday.

"It's very unexpected, but it's just incredible to see the solidarity and to see how much people who are so far away care about our community and have sympathy for what we're experiencing," Branch said.

Along with their donations, many contributors shared sweet messages referencing the gift, including several simply saying "Ireland remembers."

"From Ireland, 170 years later, the favour is returned! To our Native American brothers and sisters in your moment of hardship," donor Pat Hayes wrote.

The surge in donations to the GoFundMe campaign is just the latest development in a longstanding relationship of solidarity between the Irish and Native Americans, Choctaw Chief Gary Batton told USA TODAY.

In 2017, Choctaw leaders traveled to Midleton, Ireland, for the unveiling of a sculpture commemorating the 1847 gift, Batton said. In 2018, Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar visited tribal lands in Oklahoma and announced a scholarship program for Choctaw people to study in Ireland, according to the Irish Times.

Batton called the most recent gift "heartwarming" and said he was not surprised to see so many Irish people donating to the fundraiser.

"Through pain and agony you develop a unique bond and we have that unique bond," he said. "They're displaying that to our brothers and sisters. It just makes my heart feel...just so proud of our ancestors."

COVID-19: Native American tribes have been hit hard by coronavirus, and they're battling red tape to get help

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