Powwow

There are different, sometimes overlapping, hypotheses about the origin of the powwow as an intertribal gathering that welcomes the wider public: some scholars describe powwows as growing out of older Indigenous diplomatic, ceremonial, and social visiting traditions among many Native nations, while others emphasize the distinctly modern form that develops in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries as Native communities adapt, reconnect, and reaffirm identity in the face of intense outside pressure and change. Even the word itself points to deep Northeastern roots, because "powwow" is widely traced to an Algonquian term associated with a spiritual leader and curing or ceremonial practice, a reminder that gathering has long been tied to healing, responsibility, and community well-being rather than entertainment alone.

Whatever pathway one emphasizes, powwows today remain among the most important events in Native life because they bring people together in a living circle of song, dance, visiting, and cultural exchange, and they create a public space where Native nations can carry tradition forward on their own terms while also educating non-Native neighbors. For the Nanticoke Lenni Lenape Tribal Nation, in New Jersey, that continuity is visible in the long-running annual powwow begun in 1979 and held each year on the second weekend of June, when other tribes and the public are invited to join an intertribal gathering of singers, dancers, drummers, and visual artists; in this way, the powwow functions at once as reunion and renewal, a place for good-hearted competition and friendship, and a time for honoring, through dedicated songs and public recognition, those who have served, those who have passed on, and those whose everyday contributions strengthen the people.

Sources:

- Smithsonian Folklife & Cultural Heritage — "American Indian Powwows: History"
- Encyclopaedia Britannica — "Powwow"
- Jersey Arts — "Pow Wow Both Cultural and Competitive"
- South Jersey Quakers — "Lenni-Lenape Tribal Pow-wow"

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Dances: Gathering and Powwow

Dances have always been an important part of Native American life, and many of the dance styles seen at powwows today evolve from social dances practiced at tribal and intertribal gatherings.

It is important to note that there are social dances performed at special gatherings that are not necessarily performed at the powwow, and what follows is a list of dances typically found at powwows rather than a complete list of Lenape or intertribal dance traditions; there are many other dances, older and celebrated for different reasons and seasons, such as the Green Corn Dance, the Snake Dance, Circle or Round Dances, two-step partner dances, go-gettem dances, the robin dance, and many others, and across these older social and ceremonial dance traditions it is also common for movement, rhythm, and regalia to echo the living world around us.

In many Native dance teachings, dancers do not "pretend" to be nature as entertainment; instead, they reflect relationships with animal nations, plant relatives, waters, winds, and seasonal cycles, using posture, footwork, timing, and gesture to honor what those beings represent: alertness, endurance, protection, renewal, migration, balance, or the return of spring. A dancer might carry a grounded, stalking step that recalls hunting and tracking, or a light, quick pattern that suggests birds and the way they move through air and brush; turns and directional changes can mirror the way animals circle, watch, and respond to the world, while the steady pulse of the drum can be understood as aligning the body to heartbeat, earth rhythm, and communal time. Regalia often reinforces these relationships through materials and forms: feathers, fur, shells, bone, hide, and plant-based elements, so the dancer's movement and the sound of fringe, cones, bells, or shells become part of the story, like wind through grass or rain through leaves. In this way, dances that reference beings like the snake or the robin are not simply "about" an animal; they can be teachings in motion about observation, respect, and reciprocity, reminding us that our cultures are not separate from the natural world but arise from it and remain accountable to it.

While dance styles and regalia continue to adapt over time, their meaning and importance do not. At powwows, the Grass Dance is commonly performed by men and is widely described as coming from Plains tribal societies and warrior or dance societies, with origin stories that connect it to preparing ceremonial grounds by "laying down" or blessing the grass and to honoring disciplined movement and responsibility to the circle (Indian Youth provides a clear overview of the style and regalia, and the Smithsonian Folklife powwow exhibition discusses how powwow dance categories develop and circulate intertribally). The Jingle Dress Dance is a women's dance strongly associated with healing and is frequently traced in published cultural education sources to an origin during the 1918 influenza epidemic, when a dream or vision instructed the making of a dress with metal cones whose sound accompanies the dancer's prayers for wellness; many public-facing Native cultural institutions describe it as a healing dance and emphasize that the dancer's steps are carried with intention rather than simply performance (Indian Youth summarizes the origin story and purpose, and the Smithsonian Folklife materials provide broader context for powwow as a living cultural practice).

Men's Fancy Dance, often described as a fast, athletic, high-energy style that developed in the twentieth century within powwow contexts, emphasizes stamina, precise footwork, and vibrant regalia.

In many powwow programs, the women's counterpart is presented as Fancy Shawl, a dynamic style that emphasizes agility, turns, and expressive movement with the shawl as part of the dancer's visual

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language (Indian Youth offers accessible descriptions of both, and the Smithsonian Folklife history of powwows helps situate these categories within modern intertribal powwow development). Hoop Dance is commonly presented as a storytelling form in which a dancer uses hoops to create shapes that evoke animals, plants, and cycles of life. It is often framed in educational resources as a dance that teaches transformation, balance, and the interconnection of living beings through images formed in motion (Indian Youth describes the basic purpose and presentation, and additional museum and public media resources often interpret it as a narrative and a teaching through movement).

Men's Traditional Dance is frequently described in powwow education materials as one of the older powwow categories, with movements that can reference hunting, tracking, and warrior responsibilities, and regalia elements that may include items understood as honoring relationships with the animal nations and the responsibilities of protection and provision; many educational sources emphasize that even when performed in contemporary powwow settings, the dance retains a strong connection to honor, story, and disciplined presence in the arena (Cradleboard Teaching Project and TPT's powwow resources provide category descriptions and interpretive notes used widely in educational settings).

Women's Traditional Dance is often described as grounded, dignified, and prayerful, with movement that emphasizes poise and relationship to the drum, and many Native cultural education sources interpret it as a dance of honor that can carry gratitude, prayer, and recognition of women's roles in community continuity; in Lenape community contexts it can also be described through seasonal relationship to land and renewal, and it continues to be danced both at powwows and at other social gatherings where community, respect, and responsibility are centered (Indian Youth provides a general category overview while Smithsonian Folklife offers broader context for powwow meanings and continuity).

https://indianyouth.org/powwow-dances-and-regalia/; http://www.cradleboard.org/curriculum/powwow/supplements/powwow/mens_dance.html; http://www.tpt.org/powwow/menstrad.html; https://folklife.si.edu/online-exhibitions/american-indian-powwows/smithsonian

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