

# Congressman Jeff Fortenberry

First District of Nebraska

T H E F O R T  
R E P O R T C O L U M N

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## Honoring Chief Standing Bear

*By Congressman Jeff Fortenberry*

Money is more than just a way we pay for products and services. It is also a manner in which we honor America's great men and women. The visages of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln on our \$1 and \$5 bills remind us of how great leaders can change the course of history. Legislation that has been approved by Congress and signed by the President will potentially give us the opportunity to so honor one of Nebraska's great leaders, Chief Standing Bear.

Chief Standing Bear prevailed in one of the most important court cases for Native Americans in our nation's history. Standing Bear was born on Ponca land in what is now Nebraska. Accounts vary on when he was born; most say 1834, although some suggest 1829. Because of his considerable leadership abilities, he became a chief of the Ponca Tribe at a young age.

Due to a misbegotten treaty, in 1878 the government forced the Ponca Tribe to leave its home in Nebraska for Indian Territory in what is now Oklahoma. The hardship of travel, illness, and the inhospitable conditions of Indian Territory caused many members of the tribe to perish including Chief Standing Bear's son. Determined to bury his son in his homeland, Chief Standing Bear led thirty members of his tribe back to their home in Nebraska. Upon their return, they were arrested by the Department of the Interior.

Before they could be returned to Indian Territory, Chief Standing Bear enlisted the help of Thomas Tibbles of the Omaha World-Herald and two attorneys. Together, they petitioned the federal court to rule on the Ponca Tribe's treatment by the government. In 1879 the case came before Judge Elmer Dundy. Chief Standing Bear, at the conclusion of the proceedings, extended his hand as he took the oath and said, "That hand is not the color of yours, but if I pierce it, I shall feel pain. If you pierce your hand, you also feel pain. The blood that will flow from mine will be the same color as yours. I am a man. God made us both."

Judge Dundy ultimately ruled that Native Americans were citizens with all of the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution. The Ponca won their freedom and eventually were able to return to their home in Nebraska. Chief Standing Bear would spend the next four years touring the Eastern United States promoting Native American rights.

The "Native American \$1 Coin Act," which I have strongly supported, will potentially enable us to recognize the achievements of this great hero. This legislation requires that in the future the

reverse side of \$1 coins will bear “images celebrating the important contributions made by Indian Tribes and Individual Native Americans to the development of the United States and the history of the United States.”

The inclusion of Chief Standing Bear on the reverse side of \$1 coins would honor both the courage of this native son of Nebraska and his great contribution to the freedom and civil liberties of this nation. In the coming weeks, I will work with other members of Congress to petition the coin design selection committee on behalf of Chief Standing Bear.

The timing is right. 2008 is the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Chief Standing Bear’s death.