



THE MONTANA CHALLENGE

How much do you know about Montana? Do you want bragging rights? This is a fun challenge that awards gift cards to the most knowledgeable students. Challengers will answer 20 questions randomly drawn from 100 key questions on the state of Montana.

The Challenge sponsors are the Sons and Daughters of Montana Pioneers and the Montana Historical Society.

Rules

1. You have 20 minutes to answer the 20 questions on your own, without looking up the answers.
2. All those who receive at least a score of 80% (answering 16 of 20 questions correctly) will have their names put in a drawing for a \$25 gift card. You will also receive a "I Made the Challenge" certificate.

To help you prepare, we're giving you this Study Guide to help you review the following topics:

Challenge topic	Why this history matters...
Montana's constitution and its system of government	<p>Understanding Montana's Constitution helps you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Know your rights as a Montana citizen.- Understand how your state government works.- Become an active, informed participant in democracy. <p>Remember: <i>The Constitution isn't just an old document. It affects your life every day by protecting your freedoms and establishing how Montana's government serves you.</i></p>
Montana history	<p>Understanding Montana's history helps you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Appreciate the long history of the tribal nations in this region.- See how diverse groups built Montana together.- Recognize Montana's boom-and-bust economic cycles.- Understand the role natural resources played in bringing settlers here.- Discover how tribal nations remain a vital part of Montana today.- Recognize the importance of tribal sovereignty and treaty rights.- See how individuals shaped Montana's history.- Appreciate Montana's contributions to national history.
Geography	<p>Understanding Montana's geography helps you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Appreciate Montana's diverse landscape.- Know where resources and communities are located.- Navigate and explore Montana.- Understand environmental issues.
State symbols	<p>Knowing Montana's state symbols helps you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Discover some of the things that make Montana special.- Connect with Montana's identity.

As a bonus, here are some Fun Facts about the state . . .

- Montana has more than 3,000 named lakes and reservoirs.
- The Continental Divide crosses Montana for about 800 miles.
- Montana is larger than Germany! And, you could fit the entire country of Bulgaria inside Montana.
- Montana has more than 10 million acres of wilderness.
- The Missouri River is 2,341 miles long (the longest river in North America).
- Flathead Lake is so clear you can see 20+ feet down.
- Montana's state motto is one of only two state mottos in Spanish (New Mexico is the other).
- Jeannette Rankin lived to be 92 years old.
- Jack Horner has dyslexia but became a world-famous scientist.
- Great Falls' waterfalls were an 18-mile portage for Lewis and Clark's expedition.
- Mike Mansfield served as Ambassador to Japan for 11 years after leaving the U.S. Senate.





STUDY GUIDE

Montana's Constitution

What is a constitution?

A constitution is a set of rules and principles that establishes how a government works. It's the highest law in a state or country, meaning all other laws must follow what the constitution says.

Because the [Montana Constitution](#) is the supreme law of Montana, it is more important than any other state law. When people talk about "the supreme law of Montana," they're talking about the Montana Constitution, not the Montana Code or court decisions.

Has Montana had many constitutions?

Montana has had just two constitutions throughout its history. Montana's first [1889 Constitution](#) was replaced with the current (1972) Constitution after 83 years.

By the 1970s, Montana's government and society had changed a lot since 1889. The new [1972 Constitution](#) made the government more modern and efficient and expanded rights of Montana citizens. It established a framework for state government and citizenship, defined powers and guaranteed rights such as environmental protection, public access to information, a right to participate in government, and recognized Native American heritage. It is considered by many to be a model for other states.

How does the Montana Constitution start?

The Montana Constitution begins with the words "[We the People](#)." These three words represent the principle of self-government, which means that the power of government comes from the citizens themselves, not from a king or dictator. In other words, the government exists to serve the people, not the other way around.

What is a constitutional amendment?

A constitutional amendment is a [change or addition to a constitution](#). As times change, sometimes a constitution needs to be updated to reflect new values or solve new problems. But an amendment is not:

- A regular law passed by the legislature, or
- A court decision, or
- A veto by the governor.

Amendments are harder to pass than regular laws because they change the constitution itself. This makes sure that the constitution isn't changed too easily or too often.

What does Montana's Bill of Rights do?

Montana's "Declaration of Rights" is Article II of the Montana Constitution. This section lists the basic rights and freedoms that all Montanans have. It's like the U.S. Bill of Rights but includes rights specific to Montana.

The 1972 Montana Constitution's Declaration of Rights names 34 rights and freedoms. This is more than most state constitutions and shows Montana's strong commitment to individual liberty.

Here are three examples of rights protected by Montana's Constitution:

1. Freedom of Speech - You can express your opinions and ideas without fear of government punishment.
2. Right to Bear Arms - You have the right to own firearms.
3. Freedom of Religion - You can practice any religion you choose, or no religion at all.

What are some other rights in Montana's Declaration of Rights?

Remember that there are 34 rights and freedoms granted by the Montana Constitution. Here are some others:

- Freedom of the press (newspapers, TV, websites can report news freely)
- Right to privacy
- Right to know (access to government information)
- Right to a clean and healthful environment
- Right to participate in government

Montana's System of Government

Like the U.S. government, Montana's government is divided into three branches—legislative, executive, and judicial.

Why three branches?

A key part of government in the U.S., checks and balances prevent any one branch of government from becoming too powerful. Checks and balances protect our freedom by ensuring no single person or group has too much control.

This works because each branch has some power over the others, for example:

- The Legislature makes new state laws.
- The Governor can veto (reject) laws passed by the Legislature.
- The Legislature can override a veto with enough votes.
- The Supreme Court can determine if laws are constitutional.
- The Governor appoints judges (with approval).

The Legislative Branch—the lawmakers

The legislative branch is made up of two parts—the Senate and the House (just like at the federal level).

- The Montana Senate has 50 members, called senators. A Senator's term (time they are in office) is 4 years. Their role is to review and vote on proposed laws, which start as bills. Only after a bill is passed and signed by the Governor does it become law.
- The Montana House of Representatives has more members—100 representatives. They each serve for 2 years. Representatives' role is to propose and vote on bills.

The Executive Branch—the enforcers

The second branch (the Executive Branch) is made up of key officials:

- The State Governor who can sign or veto bills, appoint officials, and create the state budget to present for approval to the legislature.
- The Lieutenant Governor is the second-in-command of the state. The Lieutenant Governor becomes governor if the current governor can no longer serve (due to death, resignation, or removal from office).
- Other officials. There are other officials in the Executive Branch, such as the Attorney General (the chief lawyer for the state), the Secretary of State (who oversees elections and keeps state records), and other department heads. These officials typically serve for 4 year terms. Their main job is to enforce state laws and lead the state government.

The Judicial Branch—the interpreters

This third branch of government is the Judicial Branch, which is our court system. The courts interpret laws and determine the guilt or innocence of people accused of violating the law. The Montana Supreme Court is the highest court in Montana. It is made up of 7 justices whose main job is to have final say on legal disputes in Montana and whether laws follow our state constitution.

Montana Statehood

Montana's path to becoming a state can be thought of in three eras:

1. Pre-territory. In the early 1860s, gold was discovered in Montana region, making it a popular destination. At that time, the Montana region was part of other territories (Idaho Territory and others).
2. The Montana Territory Era (1864-1889). On May 26, 1864, the Montana Territory was created by Congress and for 25 years, Montana was a territory, not yet a state. (Territories had less power than states and were governed by federally-appointed officials.)
3. Then, statehood. On November 8, 1889, Montana became the 41st state, entering the Union along with three other western states. This grouping of states was known as the "Omnibus States" (North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, and Washington all became states in November 1889).

Three Montana Capitals

Montana has had only 3 capitals in its history:

1. Bannack became the first Territorial capital in 1864. It is in southwest Montana and was the site of Montana's first major gold discovery in 1862. Bannack is now a ghost town and state park.
2. Virginia City became the second Territorial capital in 1865. It is also in southwestern Montana. It became the capital after a major gold discovery in nearby Alder Gulch brought most of the people living in Bannack to Virginia City.
3. Helena was named territorial capital in 1875. It was the third and final of Montana's territorial capitals. Helena, like the first two territorial capitals, was located near a major gold discovery in western Montana. When Montana became the 41st state in 1889, Helena became the temporary state capital.

Competition to be Montana's capital

Many cities competed to become Montana's permanent capital, including:

- Anaconda (backed by Copper King Marcus Daly)
- Bozeman
- Deer Lodge
- Helena (the winner!)

Interestingly, even though it's Montana's largest city today, Billings did not compete to be the state capital.

Sidney Edgerton, Montana's First Territorial Governor

Sidney Edgerton served as Territorial Governor from 1864 to 1866. He was a lawyer and politician from Ohio. Edgerton helped establish Montana Territory's first government.

Montana Immigration and Economy

What group came to Montana in the early 1800s?

Fur traders. These traders came seeking beaver pelts which were extremely valuable in Europe and the eastern United States because they were used to make fashionable felt hats. It was for that reason that traders came to Montana's rivers and streams to trap beaver.

But by the late 1830s, beavers were overhunted and hard to find, so fur companies switched to harvesting buffalo/bison pelts instead. The scale of the destruction of buffalo herds in the American West during the 19th century is the largest in known human history—it was a slaughter supported by the U.S. government that led to approximately 50 million buffalo being reduced to several hundred. This harvest eventually contributed to near-extinction of the buffalo.

The Métis—a Unique cultural peoples

The Métis were an important part of the fur trade. Many European fur trappers married Indian women. Their children and grandchildren became known as Métis. They developed their own distinct culture and language.

The most famous Métis invention is the Red River Cart, a two-wheeled cart made entirely of wood (no metal) that could be taken apart and floated across rivers. The carts were essential for transporting furs and supplies and seen as a symbol of Métis ingenuity.

Then, the Gold Rush

In the mid-1800s, the discovery of gold in places like Bannack (1862), Alder Gulch (near Virginia City, 1863) and other mining camps throughout Montana brought more people from all over the world seeking fortune. Because this migration to Montana came from all over the world, there was great cultural diversity as the gold camps were a blend of cultures. One group was Chinese immigrants, who made up about 10% of Montana's population in 1870. Other groups included Europeans, Americans from eastern states, and more.

Mining silver and copper

Silver and copper mining required even more people than gold mining did.

Butte started as a gold camp. In the 1870s, it became known for its silver mines. Then, in the 1880s, copper became its most important mineral. At the time, copper was needed for electrical wiring (new technology at the time!). Butte became known as "The Richest Hill on Earth."

It was during the copper-mining heights that three men became known as "The Copper Kings":

1. William Clark - Banker and mine owner
2. Marcus Daly - Founded Anaconda Copper Mining Company
3. Augustus Heinze - Independent mine owner and lawyer

They were fierce competitors and their battles for power and control became known as "The War of the Copper Kings."

Two powerful early companies

Two companies shaped much of Montana's economy in the late 1800s and early 1900s. These were:

- The Anaconda Company (the "Anaconda Copper Mining Company"). It controlled most of Butte's copper mines, owned newspapers, and had huge political influence. At the time, it was one of the world's largest mining companies.
- The Northern Pacific Railway was the first transcontinental railroad through Montana (1880s). It transported ore, cattle, crops, and people and owned vast amounts of land.

Together these companies dominated Montana's economy and politics for decades.

Another major industry—logging

People also came to Montana to harvest timber. Logging damaged the environment, but it benefited Montana's economy by providing jobs and lumber to build the state's railroads, mines, and homes.

Before trucks, loggers used a variety of ways to get their product (logs) to market:

- Rivers floated logs downstream in "log drives."
- Railroad companies built special logging railroads.
- Horses dragged logs through forests.

The Homesteading Boom (1909-1918)

Homesteading was the next major reason for migration to Montana. First, the Homestead Act of 1862 promised 160 acres of free land if the settler lived on and farmed the land for five years.

Later, the U.S. government passed The Enlarged Homestead Act in 1909, which doubled the land available to 320 acres per homesteader. The 1909 Enlarged Homestead Act was specifically designed for Montana's drier regions.

As a result, between 1909 and 1918, thousands of homesteaders from across the U.S. and Europe came to Montana to farm. Most arrived on railroads, which advertised Montana as a farming paradise.

But there was a major challenge faced by homesteaders farming on Montana's dry land regions—lack of rain. Drought conditions caused crops to fail, and many homesteaders left the state. Other farmers used irrigation to grow crops like sugar beets, which were processed to make sugar. Sugar beets required special factories to extract sugar and provided jobs and economic opportunity.

How railroads changed everything

In the early 1900s, three major railroads connected Montana to the rest of the United States: The Northern Pacific, the Great Northern, and the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railways. The arrival of railroads had a huge impact on Montana. They made it easier to ship crops to market—farmers could sell their grain and livestock far more easily. Railroads also brought more settlers to the state and made it easier to get supplies like building materials, tools, and food. Railroads were important for logging and mining as well, bringing equipment in and transporting ore (mined material) out.

The 1918 Flu Epidemic

During World War I, a 1918 world-wide flu epidemic hit Montana hard. In Montana, the “Spanish Flu” killed over 5,000 Montanans. The flu was unusual because of the age group that hit the hardest—young adults aged 20 to 40. This age group contained workers in their prime and soldiers, which made the epidemic especially tragic.

Montana's post-World War II economic growth

During the period 1945-1965 (after World War II), the most significant factor for the state's economic growth were federal spending and dam construction. This included spending (and jobs) on building dams, like Hungry Horse Dam, to generate hydroelectric power (electricity). It also included building highways and military bases and installations.

During that time, another growing industry—oil and gas extraction—saw substantial growth as new technologies made extraction possible. This boom created jobs in eastern Montana, added to state revenue, and continues to be important today.

Native Peoples of Montana

Montana is home to 12 distinct tribal nations with rich histories extending thousands of years before European contact. Montana recognized that history in its 1972 Constitution. It is the only state in the nation whose constitution recognizes Indians' distinct and unique cultural heritage.

Montana Indians' traditional life—hunting bison

Indians hunted bison, necessary for food and supplies, for centuries. Indians didn't have guns before Europeans arrived, and these methods were used before horses came to the Plains (around the 1700s):

1. Buffalo jumps, where Indians drove herds over cliffs (like the First Peoples Buffalo Jump near Great Falls). Hunters would stampede bison toward cliff edges where the buffalo would fall and die. This method provided large amounts of meat, hides, and materials.
2. Corrals were also used to trap bison. These used natural features like valleys or canyons and allowed for controlled hunting.

Montana is home to 12 federally-recognized Tribal Nations

The 12 Nations are:

1. Blackfeet (Piikuni)
2. Crow (Apsálooke)
3. Northern Cheyenne (Tsétséhéstahese naa Suhtaio)
4. Assiniboine (Nakoda)
5. Gros Ventre (Aaniiih)
6. Sioux (Dakota/Lakota)
7. Kootenai (Ktunaxa)
8. Pend d'Oreille (Qlispe, or Kalispel)
9. Salish (Séliš)
10. Chippewa (Ojibwe)
11. Cree (Neyiowahk)
12. Little Shell Chippewa (Anishinaabe and Métis)

[*Important Note:* Tribes like Cherokee, Seminole, Hopi, Navajo, Choctaw, and Mohawk are *not* among the Tribal Nations with governments in Montana—they have reservations in other parts of the United States. Also, the above 12 Tribal Nations are not the only Indigenous peoples to have inhabited the Montana region; we also acknowledge Tribes such as the Bannock, Nez Perce, Northern Arapaho, Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara and Shoshone.]

Montana contains 7 reservations

Reservations means lands kept by Tribal Nations for their own use, created through treaties with the U.S. government. Indians gave up most of their lands in exchange for goods, services, and money but Tribes retained these reservation lands.

Montana's 12 Tribal Nations share 7 reservations because some reservations are home to multiple Tribes. The 7 Montana reservations are:

1. Blackfeet Reservation (Blackfeet)
2. Crow Reservation (Crow)
3. Northern Cheyenne Reservation (Northern Cheyenne)
4. Fort Peck Reservation (Assiniboine and Sioux)
5. Fort Belknap Reservation (Gros Ventre and Assiniboine)
6. Flathead Reservation (Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes: Salish, Pend d'Oreille, and Kootenai)
7. Rocky Boy's Reservation (Chippewa-Cree)

The Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians do not have a reservation. Their headquarters is in Great Falls.

Important Native leaders

Chief Dull Knife of the Northern Cheyenne was an important leader who guided his people during difficult times, fought to keep his people in their homeland, and was known for the "Cheyenne Outbreak" and journey back to Montana.

Among other important Native leaders are Chief Joseph (Nez Perce) who was famous for his eloquent surrender speech, "From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever." This chief helped lead the Nez Perce on a 1,170-mile journey trying to reach safety in Canada but had to surrender in the Bear Paw Mountains (1877). Others include Chief Plenty Coups (Crow leader), Chief Victor (Salish leader), Sitting Bull (Lakota leader) and Crazy Horse (Lakota warrior).

Famous battles between Indian Nations and the U.S. Army

One of the most famous battles in American history is the Battle of Little Bighorn (1876), as the Army called it. Its location is in southeast Montana. However, the Lakota and Cheyenne call it "The Battle of the Greasy Grass." This battle was fought on June 25-26, 1876, between Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer leading the 7th Cavalry against Lakota, Northern Cheyenne, and Arapaho warriors who were defending their territory. While Custer and his immediate command were defeated and this was a major Native victory, it was temporary.

What are "The 7 Essential Understandings"?

In 1999, the Montana Office of Public Instruction worked with representatives from Montana's 12 tribal nations to develop important principles for teaching students about American Indians. This was the "7 Essential Understandings." Among the main ideas are:

- There is great diversity among Tribal Nations.
- Each Tribe has its own language, culture, and traditions.
- American Indians are not all the same.

The seven principles also recognize that Tribal Nations are sovereign, which means that they have self-governance and independence. Each has its own government, each makes its own laws, and Indian Nations have a government-to-government relationship with the U.S.

The Powwow as a cultural celebration

A powwow is the name for a large American Indian gathering and celebration. At powwows, there is traditional dancing, drumming and singing, arts and crafts, and traditional foods. Today, modern powwows are held throughout Montana and are open to the public. Powwows remain an important way to preserve and share Tribes' traditions.

American Indians were greatly impacted during The Assimilation Era (late 1800s - mid 1900s)

During the Assimilation Era, the U.S. government tried to force Native peoples to abandon their cultures and become like European Americans. The result was that this time caused tremendous harm but ultimately failed to destroy Native cultures. In spite of this history, Tribal Nations are maintaining and revitalizing languages and traditions for future generations.

Boarding schools. Today, we recognize this as a dark chapter in American history. The U.S. government forced Indian parents to send children to boarding schools far from home. There the children were punished for

speaking their languages and required to cut their hair and wear European-style clothing. The goal was to destroy Indian cultures and tribes.

Land loss. On many reservations, the land was divided into individual plots (allotments), and the "surplus" land was sold to non-Indian settlers. In this way, Tribes lost millions of acres of land, and the practice disrupted traditional communal land use.

Religious suppression. During the Assimilation Era, Indians were forbidden from practicing their traditional religions. Their sacred ceremonies were banned, and traditional spiritual practices were criminalized.

Indian Citizenship, not until 1920s

Indians did not automatically become U.S. citizens until 1924 when the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 granted U.S. citizenship to all Native Americans born in the U.S. Even though they were citizens in 1924, some states' laws did not allow Indians to vote until the 1940s-1960s. It wasn't until 1978 that American Indians were officially granted religious freedom by the U.S. Government.

Montana Geography

Tall mountains

Among all of Montana's mountains, Granite Peak is the tallest at 12,807 feet above sea level. Granite Peak is in the Beartooth Mountains, in south-central Montana.

What is the Continental Divide?

It is a ridge of mountain summits that separates the eastern and western U.S. watersheds. Running along the Rocky Mountain Range through Montana, this massive ridge determines which direction water flows:

- Rain falling on the west side of the Continental Divide flows to the Pacific Ocean.
- Rain falling on the east side of the Continental Divide flows to the Atlantic Ocean (via the Gulf of Mexico).

Montana rivers

The Missouri River is the longest river in Montana and, in fact, is part of the longest river system in North America. It flows from Montana to the Mississippi River. The Missouri River forms at Three Forks, Montana, where three rivers come together:

1. Madison River
2. Jefferson River
3. Gallatin River

The Missouri River is also famous for its series of waterfalls near Great Falls, Montana—the Great Falls (the city is named after these falls), Black Eagle Falls, Rainbow Falls, Colter Falls, and Crooked Falls.

While the Missouri River is Montana's longest river, the Yellowstone River is the longest contiguous (free-flowing river) in the U.S. This means that the Yellowstone River does not have any dams on its length; its waters are continuous because they are an uninterrupted flow from start to finish.

Of course, Montana has many other important rivers, including the Clark Fork River, the Milk River, the Kootenai River, and the Flathead River.

Montana's lakes

Flathead Lake in northwest Montana is not only the largest lake in the state, but also the largest natural freshwater lake west of the Mississippi River. Flathead Lake is about 28 miles long and 15 miles wide. According to local myth, a huge underwater monster lives in Flathead Lake (similar to Scotland's Loch Ness Monster!).

Montana's other large water bodies (lakes) are Fort Peck Lake (a reservoir), Hungry Horse Reservoir, and Canyon Ferry Lake.

How big is Montana?

Montana is the 4th largest state in the United States, smaller than just three other states:

1. Alaska (largest)
2. Texas (2nd largest)
3. California (3rd largest)

Montana's time zone

Different time zones exist around the globe. A time zone is a geographic area that observes a common and uniform time for legal, commercial, and social purposes. Montana is in the Mountain Time Zone.

The next time zone to Montana's west is the Pacific Time Zone and the next time zone to the east is the Central Time Zone.

Montana's counties

Montana is a very large state, and it has a large number of counties—56. Each of the 56 counties has its own county government and courthouse.

How many National Parks are in Montana?

Montana's borders contain two National Parks—Glacier National Park and Yellowstone National Park. Montana has many other protected areas, but only two National Parks.

The Berkeley Pit and the 2016 Snow Geese tragedy

Mining provided many jobs and provided metals we use every day. It also caused environmental damage. One famous example is the Berkely Pit, a massive mining pit filled with toxic water. In 2016, thousands of snow geese died after landing in the toxic water.

Montana's State Symbols

What is Montana's nickname?

Montana has several nicknames, but the most common is "The Treasure State," which refers to Montana's mineral wealth (gold, silver, copper). Another nickname is "Big Sky Country," which describes Montana's vast, open skies. This nickname, which is popular in tourism and culture, came from writer A.B. Guthrie Jr. "The Last Best Place" is a fairly recent nickname. It reflects Montana's unspoiled beauty and comes from a book of Montana essays.

State motto: "Oro y Plata"

Oro y Plata means "gold and silver" in Spanish. It reflects Montana's mining heritage as the two metals—gold and silver—were Montana's first major resources.

Montana's state flag

All states have a state flag. Montana's flag has a background of blue upon which sit the Montana state seal in the center and the words "Montana" above the state seal.

The state seal shows mountains and the Great Falls of the Missouri River, a plow, shovel, and pick (these represent agriculture and mining) and the state motto: "Oro y Plata."

What is Montana's state animal?

Montana selected the grizzly bear as its state animal. Historically, grizzly bears were found on the Plains of eastern Montana, but today they are found mainly in the Rocky Mountains.

What is Montana's state flower?

The bitterroot is Montana's state flower. The bitterroot grows in rocky, dry soil in western Montana and blooms in spring (May-June). Its flowers are pink or white.

Native Americans used the root for food and medicine. Additionally, the Bitterroot Mountains and Bitterroot Valley are named after this flower.

Does Montana have a state tree?

Yes. Montana's state tree is the Ponderosa Pine. The ponderosa is a tall tree with orange-brown, puzzle-piece bark with long needles in bundles of three.

Is there a state fruit, too?

Montana's state fruit is the huckleberry, small purple berries similar to blueberries that are used for jams, pies, and ice cream. The shrub grows wild in Montana's mountains and is a beloved Montana treat.

What is the state bird?

Montana selected the Western Meadowlark as its state bird. The Meadowlark has a yellow breast with a black V-shaped marking, a beautiful, flute-like song, and is typically found in grasslands and prairies. The Meadowlark is also the state bird of several other western states.

Montana doesn't have a state fossil, does it?

Yes! The state fossil is the Maiasaura (pronounced "my-ah-SORE-ah"). It is also known as "Good Mother Lizard" and is a form of hadrosaur, or "duck-billed dinosaur." Evidence of this animal, which lived in Montana 75 million years ago, was discovered near Choteau, Montana. This discovery of Maiasaura fossils was the first evidence that some dinosaurs cared for their young.

Well-Known Montanans

Fur traders and explorers

One of the best-known of all the early fur traders was David Thompson, an explorer who helped the North West Company open the fur trade in western Montana. Thompson was a British-Canadian explorer and mapmaker who mapped much of western North America.

John Colter was another fur trapper and mountain man. Colter first came to Montana as part of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. He left the Lewis and Clark Expedition on its return trip to trap furs and to explore the

Yellowstone area. That made him one of the first non-Native Americans to see Yellowstone's geysers and hot springs. His descriptions of Yellowstone were so incredible people didn't believe him at first.

A unique member of the Corps of Discovery

There was only one African American member of the Corps of Discovery (also known as the Lewis and Clark Expedition)—York. York was enslaved by William Clark. He was vital to the Expedition's success. He helped to hunt and gather food and to communicate with Native peoples who were fascinated by the first African American they had ever seen. His story reminds us of the complexity of American history.

Religious leaders in early Montana

William Wesley Van Orsdel ("Brother Van") was a Methodist circuit-riding missionary. He traveled thousands of miles throughout Montana on horseback preaching and, along the way, established many institutions in Montana—churches, hospitals, and universities. Van Orsdel helped establish social services in early Montana and brought education and healthcare to frontier communities.

Other famous early religious figures include Father Ravalli (a Jesuit priest and doctor) and Father De Smet (a Jesuit missionary to Native peoples).

Montana's Cowboy Artist

The best-known of all Montana artists is Charles M. Russell (Charlie Russell), the "The Cowboy Artist." Russell is known for painting scenes of cowboys, Native Americans, and frontier life.

One of his best-known works is the "Lewis and Clark Meeting Indians at Ross' Hole" mural in the Montana State Capitol's House of Representatives Chamber.

Montana's Congressional leaders

Jeannette Rankin was the first woman elected to Congress (1916), before most women could vote. This was an historic achievement because no other woman had ever been elected to the United States Congress before (from any state). She served from 1917 to 1919. She was elected for a second time in 1940 and served from 1941 to 1943.

Rankin, a pacifist (opposed to all war), is probably best known for voting "no" to the U.S. entering both World War I and World War II.

Mike Mansfield is another important Montanan politician. Mansfield served in the U.S. Congress for 34 years and was a Senator for 24 years (1953 to 1977). He was Senate Majority Leader for 16 years. Mansfield led the Senate during passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the landmark law that ended legal segregation by race. After Congress, Mansfield became U.S. Ambassador to Japan.

A famous Montana paleontologist

Montana-born Jack Horner is well-known world-wide as a dinosaur paleontologist (a scientist who studies fossil animals and plants). His groundbreaking dinosaur discoveries included providing the first evidence that some dinosaurs cared for their young. It was Horner who discovered Maiasaura ("Good Mother Lizard") nests near Choteau, Montana (this dinosaur was named Montana's State Dinosaur). Horner also worked as a technical consultant (someone who provides subject guidance for films) for five of the *Jurassic Park* films.

Fort Benton's faithful friend

A Fort Benton, Montana dog named Shep belonged to a sheepherder. In 1936, when the sheepherder fell ill and went into the hospital, his faithful dog stayed at the hospital doors. When the sheepherder died, his casket was loaded onto the train to go back to his family for burial. Shep became famous for meeting daily trains for 5 ½ years until he died in 1942 while waiting at the tracks. A bronze statue now stands in Fort Benton honoring Shep's loyalty and devotion.

Montana Cities and Towns

Across its history, Montana's "largest city" has changed.

Today's largest Montana city

Currently, Montana's largest city by population is Billings, as it has been for decades. Billings, located in south-central Montana on the Yellowstone River, had a population of over 120,000 people in 2025.

Montana's largest city in 1910

While Billings is today's largest Montana city, Butte held that place in 1910, when it was the only city in Montana with over 20,000 people. Butte grew to that size due to its mines; in fact, it was called the "Richest Hill on Earth" due to its profitable copper mines.

Montana's Capital City

Helena has been Montana's capital city since 1875. Helena is in Lewis and Clark County, named after the famous explorers. Helena started as a gold camp called "Last Chance Gulch." Its main street still follows the original gulch.

Montana has an "Electric City"

Built on the Missouri River, Great Falls became known as "The Electric City" because it has five major waterfalls on the Missouri River that were harnessed for hydroelectric dams. It is now the fourth largest city in Montana.

Montana's historic river port town

Today a small historic town, Fort Benton was the Missouri River's furthest upriver navigable port. That means that it was as far upriver as a steamboat could travel before the river became too shallow.

A town at Montana's center

Lewistown, Montana, has claim to being in the exact middle of the state.

Montana's center of vermiculite mining

Vermiculite, a mineral that expands when heated, is used for insulation and gardening. The Montana town of Libby once had the world's largest vermiculite mine. However, the mine closed in 1990 due to the large amounts of highly dangerous asbestos in its vermiculite.

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