



STEPHEN R. WARD

Partner

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Stephen Ward is among the most experienced attorneys in the field of American Indian/Native American law in the nation, and he applies his expertise in a wide variety of matters and for both tribal and other clients. Steve began representing Indian tribes in 1994, and since then he has acquired a thorough understanding of and expertise in the field. His matters have included major national Indian law litigation and appeals, the subjects of which have included sovereignty and jurisdictional disputes, environmental and energy matters, breach-of-trust claims, cultural properties law, and many others. Additionally, he regularly provides counsel in a variety of Indian country business projects, financings, major gaming and resort developments, and other matters. Steve's clients are similarly diverse—from Indian tribes and tribal enterprises to national corporations and financial institutions. He founded, and continues to be involved in leading, the firm's Indian law practice.

During the course of his career, Steve has represented Indian tribes and tribal interests throughout the nation. He has handled litigation and other matters on many leading issues of the day, including, among others, in the areas of enforcement of trust and fiduciary obligations owed to tribes and individual Indian people, Indian country environmental matters, allottee rights, energy matters, the scope and application of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, tribal sovereign immunity, tribal tort claims, Indian country taxation, and tribal-state jurisdictional disputes. Steve has handled appeals before the United States Supreme Court and several of the United States Courts of Appeals. He also practices regularly before federal administrative tribunals with jurisdiction over Indian country matters.

Steve's practice also has a significant focus on business and economic development in Indian country, and on Indian country commercial transactions. He has had a key role in the development, financing, and operation of tribal

PRACTICES

American Indian / Native American
Energy
Litigation
Litigation and Alternative Dispute Resolution

INDUSTRIES

Energy
Indian Country Business and Finance

CLERKSHIPS

Law Clerk for Hon. William J. Holloway, Jr., U.S. Court of Appeals, Tenth Circuit, 1991 - 1993

Law Clerk for Hon. Layn R. Phillips, U.S. District Court, W.D. of Oklahoma, 1990 - 1991

EDUCATION

University of Tulsa, J.D. 1990

Oklahoma State

Stephen R. Ward

enterprises, including gaming and resort enterprises. Steve also provides counsel to corporate and business clients who do business with Indian country. In this area, he has assisted with matters including the development of retail outlets and other businesses on Indian lands.

Another aspect of Steve's practice has been the area of management of tribal legal affairs. He has served as general counsel to two Indian nations. Steve has handed a number of matters of first-impression for tribes, including in the areas of sovereignty and sovereign immunity, conveyance and partition of Indian lands, environmental law, and intellectual property law.

Experience

Represented an Indian tribe in obtaining an opinion from the National Indian Gaming Commission in November 2014 authorizing gaming on newly acquired lands pursuant to the "last recognized reservation" exception under 25 U.S.C. § 2719(a)(2)(B).

Representing the Sac and Fox Nation of Oklahoma and the surviving sons of Jim Thorpe in obtaining a determination in a federal court requiring a repatriation proceeding concerning his remains pursuant to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, a ruling subsequently reversed by the Third Circuit and still on appeal, *see Thorpe et al. v. Borough of Jim Thorpe*, cv?10?1317, 2013 WL 1703572 (M.D. Pa. Apr. 19, 2013), *rev'd*, 770 F.3d 255 (3rd Cir. 2014).

Representing the Quapaw Tribe of Oklahoma and individual members of the tribe in breach-of-trust litigation before the U.S. Court of Federal Claims brought pursuant to a special congressional reference adopted by the United States House of Representatives in December 2013, *see Bear et al. v. United States*, 13?cg?51?TCW (Fed. Cl.) (pending).

Represented an Indian tribe in obtaining a partition in January 2013 of undivided fee and restricted Indian land—one of the few such actions approved in modern times, *see In re Estate of Armstrong*, No. P-000073620IP (Interior Bd. Indian Apps. January 23, 2013).

Represented a tribal enterprise in connection with a \$41.5 million senior secured credit facility in June 2012.

Representing the Quapaw Tribe of Oklahoma in major breach-of-trust litigation before the U.S. Court of Federal Claims initiated in January 2012, *see Quapaw Tribe of Oklahoma v. United States*, 12-cv-592-TCW (Fed. Cl.) (pending).

University, B.S. 1978

ADMISSIONS

Oklahoma - 1990

U.S. District Court, E.D. of Oklahoma - 1995

U.S. District Court, N.D. of Oklahoma - 1993

U.S. District Court, W.D. of Oklahoma - 1990

U.S. Court of Appeals, Fifth Circuit - 1996

U.S. Court of Appeals, Eighth Circuit - 1995

U.S. Court of Appeals, Tenth Circuit - 1991

U.S. Court of Appeals, Eleventh Circuit - 1997

U.S. Court of Appeals, Federal Circuit - 1999

U. S. Supreme Court - 1996

Court of Indian Offenses - 1994

Court of Indian Appeals - 1994

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Representing more than 1,000 members of the Quapaw Tribe of Oklahoma in breach-of-trust litigation before the U.S. Court of Federal Claims filed in January 2012, *see Goodeagle et al. v. United States*, 12-cv-431-TCW (Fed. Cl.) (pending).

Represented a tribal enterprise in connection with the issuance of \$295 million in senior secured notes in July 2011.

Represented a tribal enterprise in obtaining a federal court decision holding that, as is also the case with respect to states, federal patent laws do not provide for waivers of immunity for claims against Indian tribes, *see Specialty House of Creation, Inc. v. Quapaw Tribe of Oklahoma*, No. 10?cv?371?GKF-TLW, 2011 WL 308903 (N. D. Okla. Jan. 27, 2011).

Representing Indian allottees in obtaining a federal court ruling in December 2010 permitting them to take direct action against a third party when the Secretary of the Interior refused to take action to collect proceeds from the sale of their resources, *see Gilmore et al. v. Salazar et al.*, 748 F. Supp.2d 1299 (N.D. Okla. 2010), *aff'd in part rev'd in part*, No. 11-5025, 2012 WL 473530 (10th Cir. Feb. 2, 2012) (pending).

Represented the Quapaw Tribe of Oklahoma in litigation establishing an Indian tribe's right to pursue claims as a sovereign (*parens patriae*) for natural resource damages for the lands within its Indian country jurisdiction, *see Quapaw Tribe of Oklahoma et al. v. Blue Tee Corp. et al.*, 653 F. Supp. 2d 1166 (N.D. Okla. 2009).

Represented a tribal enterprise in obtaining a \$25 million equipment financing facility in November 2007.

Represented a tribal enterprise in connection with the issuance of \$197 million in senior notes and \$52 million in senior subordinated notes in October 2007.

Represented federal royalty payor in litigation successfully establishing in ruling of first impression that federal statutes of limitation are applicable to collection of federal oil and gas royalties, *see OXY USA, Inc., et al. v. Babbitt et al.*, 230 F.3d 1178 (10th Cir. 2001).

Represented Indian tribes and tribal enterprises in numerous actions relating to enforcing the exclusive jurisdiction of tribal courts over tort claims arising at Indian gaming enterprises in Oklahoma.

Represented tribes and tribal enterprises in numerous actions relating to the scope of tribal sovereign immunity and the scope of waivers given pursuant to such immunity, *see, e.g., Native American Distributing v. Seneca-Cayuga Tobacco Co.*, 491 F. Supp. 2d 1056 (N.D. Okla. 2007) (tribal enterprises); *Berrey et al. v. Asarco, Inc., et al.*, 439 F.3d 636 (10th Cir. 2006) (claims in recoupment).

Honors & Recognitions

Recognized by *Chambers & Partners USA* as Top Native American Lawyer (USA Nationwide, Band 3), 2023 - present

Recognized by *Chambers & Partners USA* as Top Native American Lawyer (Oklahoma, Band 1), 2016 - present

Stephen R. Ward

2018 Native American Law *Best Lawyers*[®] "Lawyer of the Year" in Tulsa

General Counsel, Quapaw Tribe of Oklahoma (O-Gah-Pah), 2002 - Present

Tribal Attorney, Sac & Fox Nation, 2008 - Present

Trustee-at-Large, Rocky Mountain Mineral Law Foundation, 2007 - 2010

Contributing Editor to the *Gower Federal Service*, 2000 - Present

Tulsa Law Journal Editor-in-Chief, 1989 - 1990

Oklahoma State University *Daily O'Collegian* Editor-in-Chief, 1978, and Managing Editor, 1977

Donart High School *Excelsior* Editor-in-Chief, 1973, Managing Editor, 1974

Recipient of Eagle Scout award, 1972

Author of "Maynard v. Cartwright: How the Supreme Court Killed the Catchall Category in the Oklahoma Death Penalty," 24 *Tulsa Law Journal* 215 (1988)

Recipient of the 2009 *Journal Record* Leadership in Law Award

Listed in *The Best Lawyers in America*[®] - Native American Law (2010 - present)

Community & Professional

Tulsa County Bar Association

Oklahoma Bar Association

Muscogee (Creek) Nation Bar Association

Quapaw Tribe of Oklahoma (O-Gah-Pah) Bar Association

Federal Bar Association

Rocky Mountain Mineral Law Foundation

News

58 Conner & Winters Lawyers Recognized in 2026 Edition of *The Best Lawyers in America*®
08.29.2025

30th Edition of Best Lawyers® Recognizes 67 Attorneys from Conner & Winters
08.18.2023

29 Attorneys Selected to 2022 Super Lawyers & Rising Stars Lists
11.14.2022

Oklahoma Super Lawyers Names Conner & Winters Attorneys to 2021 Lists
10.21.2021

Conner & Winters Attorneys Honored by Chambers USA 2021
05.26.2021

Oklahoma Super Lawyers Names Conner & Winters Attorneys to 2020 Lists
11.10.2020

Peers Rank Conner & Winters Lawyers as the Best in their Field
09.16.2020

11 Attorneys Receive Best Lawyers in America®: Lawyer of the Year award
09.16.2020

Congratulations to the 59 lawyers from Conner & Winters who were recognized in The Best Lawyers in America© 2019.
08.15.2018

Conner & Winters Recognized by Chambers USA 2018
05.03.2018

10 Conner & Winters Attorneys Named "Lawyer of the Year" by Best Lawyers in America
09.11.2017

58 Conner & Winters Attorneys Named to 2018 Best Lawyers in America List
08.15.2017

CONN-ER & WINT-ERS HONORED BY CHAMBERS USA 2017

05.26.2017

Alerts & Publications

American Indian Law Trends: Unprecedented Changes Are Underway in the Legal Profession — Including in Indian Country

07.21.2021

CLIENT ALERT: AS ALMOST GENERATIONAL TRUST LITIGATION ENDS, THE QUAPAW FINALLY GET A SETTLEMENT

11.20.2019

59 Conner & Winters Attorneys Recognized by Best Lawyers in America

08.16.2019

C&W Providing Legal Counsel to Downstream Development for the Saracen Casino Resort Project

06.14.2019

Joy in Latta after Oklahoma school board changes graduation policy to accommodate Native Americans

05.21.2019