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More than objects: Sacred artifacts return to the Onondagas

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By **Sean Kirst / The Post-Standard**



Gary Walts/The Post-Standard

A wampum belt made by Six Nations artisans, dating to at least 1800, that will be handed over to the Onondaga Nation Tuesday by officials with the Onondaga Historical Association.

A few years ago, not long after he was hired as executive director of the **Onondaga Historical Association**, Gregg Tripoli decided it was time for an important “hello.” Joined by Dr. Sally Roesch Wagner, an author and historian, Tripoli drove to a crafts fair at the **Onondaga Nation**. He wanted to introduce himself to native leaders in the ancient capital of the Six Nations.

Those greetings, for the most part, were pleasant and routine. Yet Tripoli was not prepared for the reaction of Dorothy Webster, an Onondaga clan mother who was never afraid to speak her mind. After learning of Tripoli’s new job, Webster spoke to a matter that had bothered her for years:

“You have something that belongs to us,” she said.

Webster told Tripoli the OHA kept the remains of several Indians in a downtown storeroom. She said the association was also in possession of ceremonial masks, commonly known as “false faces,” which hold sacred meaning for the people of the longhouse. Across the United States, under a federal act that covers any museum receiving

federal money, such remains and artifacts were already being returned to native governments.

The OHA, based on its funding, isn’t subject to that law. Webster appealed directly to Tripoli’s conscience. “I remember saying to (Roesch Wagner), ‘This can’t be,’” Tripoli recalls. In Syracuse, staff members told him Webster was right: The OHA had several muslin bags containing native bones excavated in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The museum also had other items Webster had mentioned, including a native wampum belt and four sacred ceremonial masks.

Tripoli said he had a gut-level reaction: “These things didn’t belong to us.” He brought the question to the OHA board of directors, which decided to return the bones and artifacts to the Onondagas.

The exchange of remains quietly occurred this spring. Some of the other items will change hands at 10 a.m. Tuesday, at the OHA museum and gallery on Montgomery Street. Webster, who died in 2010, did not live to see it happen. But Sid Hill, an Onondaga who serves as *tadadaho* — or spiritual leader — of the Six Nations, said Webster’s persistence led the OHA to make a decision that Hill views as a potential national precedent.

“Hopefully, it will send a message to other people to do the right thing,” he said. “How much more sacred can it get than to want your ancestors’ bones to be at rest? We want the ones we put to rest to have a good journey; all of our teaching about the cycle of life is surrounded by that.”

Native artifacts are often of high commercial value to collectors. Their return by a local historical society is “unusual,” said Elizabeth Sackler, founder of the American Indian Ritual Object Repatriation Foundation in New York City. The OHA’s decision, she said, “is wonderful and speaks to increased awareness over the past 20 years about the importance of raising our ‘First People’s’ culture. It’s a fundamental right to have back items of significance to your present, and therefore to your future.”

Hill said the Onondagas will find ceremonial purpose in the masks, which typically have exaggerated features and are carved from the wood of living trees. He said the masks are used by longhouse “medicine societies” for ceremonies intertwined with the healing qualities of dreams.

“We pay attention to our dreams, especially children’s dreams,” he said. “When people have problems — sickness or emotional (troubles) — they come in and in our (ceremonies) there are ways of helping them.”

To display the masks, or to photograph them, “means you lose the full meaning and they just become objects,” said Hill, who expects the masks from the OHA — some dating to the 19th century — will be cleaned and restored and again put to use.

As a gesture of appreciation to Tripoli and the museum, Hill said the Onondagas will offer a gift Tuesday to the OHA. Tony Gonyea, an Onondaga artist, has made a wampum belt closely matching a wampum the OHA is giving to the nation.

The older belt, made of white and purple shells, was obtained in 1919 by Dr. William Beauchamp, a Syracuse



John Berry/The Post-Standard

The late Dorothy Webster, an Onondaga clan mother whose passion set in motion the impending return of artifacts to the Onondaga Nation from the Onondaga Historical Association, is shown in 2005, as she delivered her nation's land rights action to federal court in Syracuse. She is accompanied by Chief Jake Edwards (left) and Oren Lyons, an Onondaga faithkeeper. Among those behind them is Sid Hill (wearing sunglasses), *tadadaho* of the Six Nations.

historian who worked for years with the Onondagas. It was originally presented to William Claus, a 19th century Canadian official who often interacted with the Six Nations. The wampum is marked with Claus' initials and the year 1800; the OHA and the Onondagas disagree over whether the specific markings are original, or whether the belt was altered after it left native hands.

Still, Hill and Tripoli agree on the larger issue, championed for years by Dorothy Webster: For a museum in many ways devoted to the past, Tuesday's ceremony will reaffirm that the Onondagas — and their culture — remain very much alive.

Sean Kirst is a columnist for *The Post-Standard*.

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