

Home At Last

OHA's return of Native items should set precedent

One way to make people do something is to pass legislation requiring the desired action. That was the case in 1990 when Congress passed the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act. The law requires that all museums that receive federal funding make public an inventory of native remains and sacred objects in their collections. If the items can be connected to an existing tribe, the museum must return them.

The thinking behind the law is that the items belong with the Native Americans. In some cases, human remains, burial items or sacred objects had been pilfered from graves. In other cases, the items were sold by people who disregarded or failed to understand their sacred significance. Passage of the law overcame another excuse: the paternalistic idea that non-Native museums were better equipped to safeguard the items.

Native Americans have the right to bury their ancestors and grave items appropriately, and to use objects that are part of their sacred, cultural and historic tradition. They are not curiosities, and should not be used for scientific or anthropological research without permission from the rightful owners.

"How much more sacred can it get than to want your ancestors' bones to be at rest?" said Tadodaho Sid Hill, spiritual leader of the Onondaga Nation. "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."

As of 2009, the remains of more than 38,600 Native Americans have been returned to tribes, including the Haudenosaunee, the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy. Close to 1 million funeral objects and 4,300 sacred objects have made their way home to Native communities.

For years, leaders at the Onondaga Historical Association acknowledged the Syracuse museum housed



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GREGG TRIPOLI (left), executive director of the Onondaga Historical Association, returns a wampum belt that has been in the museum's possession to Tadodaho Sid Hill, Onondaga spiritual leader; Jake Edwards, a member of the council of chiefs; and Tony Gonyea, an Onondaga faithkeeper.

Onondaga Indian remains, an ancient wampum belt and ceremonial masks commonly known as "false faces." (The masks are so sacred to the Iroquois that they call them "uncles.") Although exempt from the 1990 law because it receives no federal funding, the OHA did the honorable thing and returned the items to the Onondaga Nation.

OHA director Gregg Tripoli had been nudged toward the decision by an exchange with Onondaga clan mother Dorothy Webster. "You have something that belongs to us," she told him. Tripoli learned the claim was true, and the OHA's board of directors agreed to return the bones and other items to the Onondagas. "These things didn't belong to us," Tripoli said.

Onondaga leaders gracefully acknowledged the voluntary repatriation, calling it an act of kindness. Onondaga County Executive Joanie Mahoney and Syracuse Mayor Stephanie Miner said returning the items to the Onondagas amounted to correcting a historic mistake.

The return of Native items has often been fraught with legal and emotional battles, and many would not take place without the force of the 1990 repatriation law. Items remain in private collections and community museums; they occasionally turn up for sale on eBay. The respectful gesture of the OHA sets a precedent for anyone who holds Native items or remains: Return them.