

# Old Sainte Marie Among the Iroquois to start switch to Ska-nonh Great Law of Peace Center



In this file photo, Marc Wilson of Niagara Falls, a Mohawk, performs the Smoke Dance during the Iroquois Social Dance at the former Sainte Marie Among the Iroquois. (By Peter Chen)

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By **Michelle Breidenbach** | [mbreidenbach@syracuse.com](mailto:mbreidenbach@syracuse.com)

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**SYRACUSE, N.Y. - Construction is set to begin Monday on a new cultural center that honors the history of the Onondaga Nation and Onondaga Lake.**

The former Sainte Marie Among the Iroquois will be transformed into the Ska-nohn Great Law of Peace Center. It is expected to open November 21.

Onondaga Lake is a sacred place for the Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois Confederacy, which was founded on the shores of Onondaga Lake.

The Onondaga Nation is considered the central fire of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, which also includes the Mohawk, Oneida, Cayuga, Tuscarora and Seneca nations.

The "Great Law of Peace," the Iroquois constitution, is considered the first representative democracy in the west. According to oral history, the five warring nations of the Iroquois Confederacy accepted the Creator's Great Law of Peace and buried their weapons beneath a white pine tree.

The former Sainte Marie Among the Iroquois told the story of the Haudenosaunee from the perspective of the French Jesuits as they encountered the indigenous people along the shore of Onondaga Lake in the 1650s.

The new exhibits will also tell the story from the perspective of the Iroquois, who buried their weapons before then, said Philip Arnold, director of Native American studies at Syracuse University. He is directing the narrative and interpretive exhibits of the new center.

"We really want to tell the ancient story from the Haudenosaunee and the Onondaga perspective. The coming of the Jesuits, it comes much later," Arnold said.

Ska-nohn is a welcoming greeting in Onondaga language. The phrase conjures peace and wellness and is commonly used as a "how are you?" It is pronounced like "skah-known."

Unlike a traditional museum, the center will not be collecting and sharing objects, OHA Executive Director Gregg Tripoli said.

The exhibits will give visitors an oral history, told in film and other formats.

New exhibits will explore the importance of oral storytelling in Iroquois culture, the relationship between people and the environment and the influence of the first democracy on the United States.

He said the plan is to keep what's known as the "French fort" – an icon along Onondaga Lake Parkway for about 80 years.

"People know the French fort, but they don't know this ancient story and that's what we're going to be telling," Arnold said.

The building owned by Onondaga County near Onondaga Lake in Liverpool is leased by the Onondaga Historical Association.

Funding for the \$1 million project has come from Onondaga County, the Onondaga Nation, Empire State Development and several local foundations.

Onondaga County dedicated \$250,000 of room occupancy tax over three years. New York state, through Empire State Development, granted \$160,000, Tripoli said.

Contact Michelle Breidenbach anytime: [Email](#) | [Twitter](#) | 315-470-3186.