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Sacred artifacts being returned to NY tribe

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SYRACUSE, N.Y. (AP) - A central New York historical organization is returning artifacts, including a rare wampum belt believed to be more than two centuries old, to an Iroquois tribe.

The wampum belt will be repatriated to the Onondaga Indian Nation during a ceremony Tuesday at the Onondaga Historical Association's museum in Syracuse, Gregg Tripoli, the association's executive director, said Wednesday.

The historical organization has recently returned human skeletal remains and several sacred ceremonial masks to the Onondagas, whose reservation is south of Syracuse.

The repatriation of the artifacts, first reported by the Post-Standard of Syracuse, was prompted by a now-deceased Onondaga clan mother who told the association's new executive director that his organization had items belonging to the tribe, including the wampum belt.

Tripoli said it's believed all the Onondagas' other wampum belts were lost when American troops destroyed Onondaga and other Iroquois villages during the American Revolution.

The belt being returned to the tribe is made of white and purple shells. Tripoli said it was obtained in 1919 by a Syracuse historian who worked for years with the Onondagas. The belt's origins have been traced back to William Claus, a Canadian government and military official who interacted with the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The wampum is marked with his initials and the year 1800.

Sid Hill, an Onondaga spiritual leader, said the tribe will find ceremonial purpose in the masks, commonly known as false faces. He credited Dorothy Webster, an Onondaga clan mother who died in 2010, with getting the items returned to the tribe.

"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."

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