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OHA returns sacred wampum belt to Onondaga Nation



Onondaga Historical Association executive director Gregg Tripoli (left) returns a sacred wampum belt to Onondaga Nation spiritual leader Sid Hill, Chief Jake Edwards and faith keeper Anthony Gonyea at the OHA Tuesday morning. Photo by [Stephanie Bouvia](#).

By [Stephanie Bouvia](#)

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The Onondaga Historical Association completed a series of repatriations to the Onondaga Nation Tuesday, June 12, by voluntarily handing the Native American group a wampum belt that had been in its possession since 1919.

In a room filled with Syracuse officials, including Mayor Stephanie Miner and Onondaga County Executive Joanie Mahoney, Onondaga Historical Association executive director Gregg Tripoli described the OHA's mission to return cultural items to the Onondaga Nation.

“To honor this great heritage of the Haundenosaunee, and particularly the Onondaga Nation, the native inhabitants of this land and the wampum keepers of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, OHA has voluntarily repatriated from our collections, sacred items and items of cultural patrimony to the Onondaga Nation,” he said.

Those sacred items included human skeletal remains and ceremonial masks, Tripoli said. The repatriation process began three years ago, when Onondaga Nation Clan mother Dorothy Webster informed Tripoli that the OHA had the bones of ancestors of the Onondaga Nation in its collections. After investigating, OHA officials discovered they also had ceremonial masks and the wampum belt.

Onondaga County Executive Joanie Mahoney said it is crucially important to give these cultural items back to the Onondaga Nation because it is a “wrong that needs to be righted.” The Haudenosaunee have helped Mahoney understand the cultural significance of Onondaga County and Onondaga Lake, she said.

“When I came into office, and we brought the Haundenosaunee into conversation ... it changed everything in terms of our vision of the lake, and our respect for the lake,” Mahoney said.

Mayor Stephanie Miner echoed Mahoney’s sentiments, and said she is happy to see the Onondaga Nation’s sacred items repatriated to them in a respectful way.

“I am pleased to be here, to be part of the leadership that is really trying to move this community forward, and by doing so, recognizing that we have a past to be proud of. And yet we’ve made mistakes in the past, but mistakes that we can correct,” she said.

Onondaga Nation Chief Jake Edwards said he is grateful that the Onondaga Historical Association voluntarily repatriated these items, without having to go to court.

“It’s setting a great precedence for the rest of the world,” Edwards said.

Tripoli and OHA curator Tom Hunter then handed the wampum belt to Edwards and Onondaga Nation faith keeper Anthony Gonyea. To thank the OHA, Gonyea made a replica wampum belt that can be displayed in the museum.

“We’re very grateful for the work that’s been done here today, and we look forward to carrying it on,” Edwards said.

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