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A modern exchange of wampum: In a museum, healing wounds

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



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Gregg Tripoli (left), executive director of the Onondaga Historical Association, on Tuesday officially returned a 19th century wampum belt to (left to right) Sid Hall, tadadaho of the Six Nations; Onondaga Chief Jake Edwards; and Tony Gonyea, an Onondaga artist and faithkeeper who created a similar wampum belt as a gift for the OHA.

The magnitude of **Tuesday's ceremony** at the Onondaga Historical Association museum was underlined when Onondaga Nation leaders arrived with two sacred wampum belts, rarely seen outside the longhouse. The **Hiawatha Belt**, hundreds of years old, is an enduring symbol of the Six Nations. It portrays the entire confederacy as centered around a tree of peace at Onondaga.

Laid next to it Tuesday, on the same table at the **OHA**, was a wampum known as the **Dust Fan Belt**. Onondaga Chief Jake Edwards said his people often bring that wampum to important conferences. The idea is that its design of identical angles "fans away the dust," bringing clear vision to the eyes and minds of participants.

As if in living proof, the daughters of **Dorothy Webster** — representing a forgotten tale at the core of Central New York history — sat only a few feet away.

Officially, the event celebrated an unusual exchange. Over the past few months, with the approval of the museum board, OHA executive director Gregg Tripoli has **quietly returned many sacred objects** to the Onondagas. Among them were several muslin sacks containing the bones of native people. They had been unearthed by 19th-century excavations and then transported to the museum.

The OHA also returned four sacred masks now used for healing ceremonies at **Onondaga**. Tuesday, as the focal point of the gathering, Tripoli handed over a 212-year-old wampum belt to the Onondagas, who responded by presenting the OHA with a modern replica made by Tony Gonyea, an artist and an Onondaga faithkeeper.

Among the speakers were Edwards and Sid Hill, tadadaho — or spiritual leader — of the Six Nations. Both spoke of how unusual it is for any historical organization to voluntarily give back artifacts to an Indian nation. Onondaga County Executive Joanie Mahoney and Syracuse Mayor Stephanie Miner said the gesture underlines the close bond between their community and the Onondagas.

"We've made mistakes in the past," Miner said, "but mistakes ... can be corrected."

No one appreciated the point more intensely than Debby and Karen Webster and Mary Cook, daughters of Dorothy Webster, an Onondaga clan mother who died in 2010. It was Dorothy, already well into her 70s, who set Tuesday's events in motion. A few years ago, she approached Tripoli at an Onondaga crafts fair and said: "You have something that belongs to us."

Tripoli, still new to his position, was stunned to learn the OHA possessed Indian remains. He quickly looked for ways to send them back to the Onondagas. What he could not fully appreciate, at the moment Dorothy approached him, was the

profound meaning of her lineage. For almost two centuries, Central New Yorkers had lauded her direct ancestor, Ephraim Webster, as the region's first "white settler," a kind of Upstate Daniel Boone.

Ephraim, a trader and land agent, came here from New England in the 18th century. He learned the language of the Onondaga Nation, and he literally cleared the path for other families to settle in the area. Yet a deeper bond, quickly forgotten in the growing city, was never lost to the Onondagas.

They remembered how Ephraim Webster, for a time, lived among them. They remembered how he married an Indian woman and had an Onondaga son named Harry, and how Ephraim abruptly left that wife and child to marry a white woman and to raise a second family in what would soon be Syracuse. They remembered how the Onondagas gave Ephraim, as a gift, the 300 acres still visible on a map as a bite-sized chunk of land missing from their territory, and how — when Ephraim and his second wife died — all that land was inherited by Ephraim's white children, and none was left to his Onondaga son.

The late Leon Sheandoah, another Webster descendant who served as tadadaho before Hill, once said the Onondagas shared land with Ephraim "because he had an Indian wife. But it turned out different. It turned out he's a traitor."

Harry Webster would grow up to be a chief and eventually the tadadaho. Despite those achievements, Ephraim's name was revered in local history books while Harry was all but forgotten, perhaps because Harry represented a more uncomfortable civic reality. Separate Webster bloodlines continued among the Onondagas and their neighbors in Syracuse, although few beyond Onondaga territory realized the living pain of that connection.

Dorothy grew up hearing the story told by elders, which explains why she found it so galling to know the bones of her people were kept in bags by an institution that saw Ephraim as a great civic founder. Tuesday, her daughters brought the Webster name — the most vibrant and compelling of all Central New York artifacts — into the heart of the museum. The sisters watched as leaders from their nation, side by side with top officials from the city and the county, presided over an overdue cultural exchange.

While the formal term for what happened is "repatriation," a richer truth was represented by the wampum on the

Repatriation of an Onondaga wampum belt

Onondaga Historical Association gave back to the Onondaga Nation a wampum belt that was in its possession. On hand for the nation are Tadodaho Sid Hill, Jake Edwards, a member of the council of chiefs, and Tony Gonyea faith keeper. In return, the nation gave the museum a replica of the belt, which they presented to Gregg Tripoli, OHA executive director.

table:

It was a chance, after 200 years, to fan away a little dust.

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

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