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Return of Sacred Items Heals Onondaga Nation

By [Gale Courey Toensing](#) June 15, 2012

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Courtesy Onondaga Nation

Tadodaho Sidney Hill presents a replica belt to Onondaga Historical Association Museum and Research Center Executive Director Gregg Tripoli in thanks for repatriating the original belt. Tony Gonyea, the belt's maker, stands next to him.

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An important Haudenosaunee wampum belt has been returned to the **Onondaga Nation**.

Gregg Tripoli, executive director of the **Onondaga Historical Association Museum and Research Center**, presented the wampum belt to Tadodaho Sidney Hill, the spiritual leader of the Onondaga Nation and the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, during a ceremony at the museum in Syracuse on Tuesday, June 12. The return of the wampum belt completed a series of repatriations to the Onondaga Nation this spring by the OHA, including the bones of ancestors for proper burial.

"We are very appreciative for the return of our sacred and cultural items," Hill said. "These are things that belong to our culture, are a living part of our culture, and to have them back is very healing."

The Onondaga leader said in a press statement that the return of the wampum belt and other items demonstrated integrity and leadership by a private museum because the OHA voluntarily repatriated them. Under the **Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA)** objects of cultural patrimony are defined as items of ongoing historical, traditional, or cultural

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importance that cannot be owned or alienated by an individual because of their central importance to a Native American group. Haudenosaunee Confederacy Wampum Belts are an example of items of cultural patrimony. But the NAGPRA mandates only federally-funded museums, not private museums such as the OHA, to return such items to indigenous nations. The OHA's voluntary return of the wampum belt is "an excellent example for other private museums," the statement said.

"It was just the right thing to do," Tripoli said.

The late Onondaga Nation Clan Mother **Dorothy Webster** set the wheels in motion for the return of the Nation's sacred objects. Webster walked on in 2010, but when she first met Tripoli a few years earlier she told him, "You have something that belongs to us." Over the past several months, Tripoli, with the approval of his board, has returned other items of cultural patrimony to Onondaga, including four ceremonial "false face" masking and human remains.

"Hopefully, it will send a message to other people to do the right thing," Hill 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."

In appreciation for the return of the wampum belt and other items, Onondaga Nation Faithkeeper and artist Tony Gonyea made a replica of the belt that was given to the OHA to display. Wampum belts are significant objects to the Onondaga and other Haudenosaunee Confederacy nations – the Oneida, Seneca, Mohawk, Cayuga and Tuscarora – because they are historical documents that were used to make treaties and record significant events. This particular wampum belt came to the OHA in 1919 after being in possession of a family in Minoa, New York.

Many wampum belts were illegally acquired by collectors in the past. In 2008, **Sotheby's** in New York planned to put two wampum belts on the auction block during their annual spring American Indian Art auction. The wampum belts were withdrawn after the Haudenosaunee Standing Committee and cultural resources representatives of the Abenaki and Penobscot Indians wrote Sotheby's describing the belts' ceremonial and cultural value, and requesting their return to the nations.

The trade in indigenous objects is vigorous and continuing. This year's **three-day auction** at Sotheby's in May included more than 700 lots, including a Yup'ik Eskimo wood plaque mask that was in an exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1975. The mask was withdrawn, reportedly because of authenticity problems, but carried a pre-sale estimate of \$400,000-\$600,000, according to **ArtNet**. Items that did sell included a beaded hide war shirt, probably Nez Perce, for \$74,000 and a beaded and fringed hide dress, possibly Yakima, for \$46,000.

In addition to the replica wampum belt, Onondaga leaders brought to the OHA ceremony two belts that are rarely seen, but crucially important to the Haudenosaunee Confederacy: the Hiawatha Belt, which symbolizes the **founding of the Confederacy** more than 1,000 years ago on the shores of the Onondaga Lake, and the Ever-Growing Tree Belt, also known as the **Dust Fan Belt**, which symbolizes the Tree of Peace.

The Onondaga Nation is the "Firekeeper" or **central council fire** of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. The Haudenosaunee is recognized in three treaties made with the United States. The Onondaga Nation maintains a traditional government, including a traditionally-selected Council of Chiefs.

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The belt repatriated to the Onondaga Nation, in its display case at the Onondaga Historical Association Museum and Research Center prior to repatriation. (Courtesy Onondaga Nation)

Free Library in Connecticut

The Simsbury Free Library, at 749 Hopmeadow Street, in Simsbury, Connecticut, will be holding two genealogy workshops. The first will focus on federal records and will take place June 23 from 11 a.m. to noon. The second will focus on...

Genealogist to Discuss Muskogee Library Resources

The Oklahoma Historical Society Research Center Lunch & Learn Lecture will focus on library resources and how to access research help from home. It will be held June 27 from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. in the Oklahoma History Center...

Basic Genealogy Class in Sacramento

A basic genealogy class will be presented by the Sacramento Public Library July 7 at 1 p.m. The class will be held at the Central Library, at 828 I Street, in Sacramento, California. Genealogy expert Karen Burney will talk about...

Genealogy Workshops at San Francisco National Archives

The National Archives at San Francisco have a number of upcoming genealogy workshops and programs scheduled. The next one is scheduled for July 20 and will focus on Military Part II Spanish American to Vietnam. Other upcoming workshops include: August...

National Archives at Boston Offers Free Workshops

The National Archives at Boston offers free genealogy workshops and history lectures. The next lecture will focus on They Came From . . . TBA: Ethnic History & Genealogy on June 21 at 2 p.m. at the National Archives, 380 Trapelo...

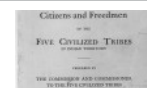
Free Genealogy Workshops in Fort Worth

The National Archives at Fort Worth is hosting free genealogy workshops the first Friday of the month through November 2 from noon to 1 p.m. The classes will be held at the Montgomery Plaza at 2600 West 7th Street, Suite...

Anza Valley Woman Holds Genealogy Classes

Donna Bradley, known in the Anza Valley as the "Jam Lady," will host a series of genealogy classes beginning March 28 at 6:30 p.m. at the Little Red School House on Highway 371 in Anza, California, reported the Anza Valley...

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