

New format will share native stories of peace

Transformation of former Sainte Marie Among the Iroquois will begin soon.

By Kathleen Poliquin
Staff writer

When the Onondaga Historical Association takes over the former site of the Sainte Marie Among the Iroquois museum in January, work will begin on a new museum that will tell the story of the Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois Confederacy, and the Great Law of Peace.

The Great Law of Peace, the oral constitution that has governed the Haudenosaunee people for more than 1,000 years, is said by some scholars to have influenced Western democracy, the women's rights movement and the formation of the United Nations.

Philip Arnold, an associate professor of religion and director of the Native American studies program at Syracuse University, has been named founding director of the new museum. SU has granted Arnold a one-year leave to work on the museum and will continue to pay his salary.

Arnold said the museum's working name is the Great Law of Peace Educational Center, but the official name will change as the project moves toward its projected opening in early 2014.

Arnold, a Jamesville resident, recently spoke with The Post-Standard about plans for

the museum.

Is it true that a letter you wrote to The Post-Standard earlier this year set everything in motion for the new museum?

We are constantly trying to educate educators about the significance of this place. So I said, why not just repurpose Sainte Marie Among the Iroquois, because we've got places where we can learn the Catholic story, but we don't have this kind of place.

Even before I knew (the letter) was published in the paper, Greg Tripoli from Onondaga Historical Association contacted me to say "This is exactly what we want to do." They'd been thinking about it a long time, but I was advocating for getting the educational institutions involved — Syracuse University, Onondaga Community College, Le Moyne College — because the more institutional support we get, the more successful it will be.

What sparked your interest in this project?

I've been working in this area really for over 30 years, I was very interested in the study of religion and in particular, Native American or indigenous religions.

A delegation of Japanese came here for a Roots of Peacemaking event because they were very interested in learning about the



Arnold

Director hopes many will invest in museum

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Haudenosaunee. They already knew quite a lot about the Haudenosaunee and the Great Law of Peace, and had, in fact, been teaching it in their schools in Japan. So, we learned that the Japanese knew more about our local history than we did ourselves in our local schools.

What kinds of things are you planning for the site?

We're talking about having a restaurant featuring native foods and getting back to local cuisine.

And as we all know, lacrosse has its native roots here. We'd like to draw on that at the center.

Onondaga has a great artistic tradition, so there will be fine arts displays, singing, dancing — those kinds of things.

The French Fort will remain, but the exhibits will reflect a shift of perspective.

Will the museum provide mostly an oral history of the Haudenosaunee?

History is written down, largely, by white colonizers, so you get a certain view of Native American culture . . . but it's never been told from the point of view of the Haudenosaunee. They perform stories in their native language, fundamentally about peace, unlike the stereotype of native people, which is always about war and war paint and such.

How much money has been committed and will it be enough?

Onondaga County and the Onondaga Historical Association have each pledged \$75,000 for, I believe, the first two years. We're looking for other institutions to also invest. We're going to make a proposal to the Onondaga Nation chiefs for support of particular events at the center.

Our hope is that everyone will come to the table and invest in the center.

Are other nations of the confederacy coming to the table for this?

Well, could be, but that has to be led by the Onondaga Nation. We would like to have other indigenous people from throughout the world come and share their peace traditions.

The kind of peace we're talking about is not just between human beings, but between human beings in balance with the earth, the environment.