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Great Law: Education center would honor Haudenosaunee contributions

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 **The Post-Standard Editorial Board**
By

At last, a museum focusing on the history of the Haudenosaunee — and their deep connection to Onondaga Lake — is on its way to becoming a reality.

The Onondaga Historical Association last week announced a plan to lease the Sainte Marie Among the Iroquois site from Onondaga County for the Great Law of Peace [Educational](#) Center (its working title).

OHA is working in partnership with the Onondaga Nation, Le Moyne [College](#) and Syracuse University, with seed money from OHA and the county. SU also is lending its director of Native American studies, Philip Arnold, to be the center's founding director.

The Metropolitan Development Association proposed a Haudenosaunee (or Iroquois Confederacy) museum in 1999, but it went nowhere.

In an op-ed published March 16 in The Post-Standard, Arnold proposed it [again](#) as an alternative use of the Sainte Marie site. Sainte Marie commemorates 17th century encounters between French Jesuits and the Haudenosaunee — a narrow slice of history that mainly recalls the often violent conversion of Native Americans to Catholicism.

"The colonial story of conquest has been devastating to indigenous peoples, to the environment, and we are now all experiencing the consequence," Arnold wrote in his op-ed.

Instead, he wondered aloud, why not celebrate the reason the Haudenosaunee hold Onondaga Lake sacred: Along its shores, oral history has it, the five warring nations of the Iroquois Confederacy accepted the Creator's Great Law of Peace, and buried their weapons beneath a white pine tree. Their "oral constitution" laid the foundation for Western democracy.

"Telling an ancient story of the founding of the Great Law of Peace and the indigenous roots of U.S. democracy would refocus our region around a different set of values," Arnold wrote.

Of course, a Great Law of Peace Educational Center would be an empty gesture without the support and involvement of the Onondaga Nation. Tadadaho Sid Hill, the nation's spiritual leader, said the Onondaga will provide expertise and knowledge to the endeavor. "Whatever they're teaching now in [schools](#) is insufficient as to who we are and what

we've done," Hill told The Post-Standard.

The new center will tell the Haudenosaunee story through exhibits, song, dance, oral history, food and even lacrosse, the Iroquois' sacred game. "The French Fort will remain, but the exhibits will reflect a shift in perspective," Arnold said in an interview with staff writer Kathleen Poliquin.

At the same time, our collective perspective of Onondaga Lake is shifting, as well — from contempt and disdain to rebirth and revitalization. Together, a cleaner lake and a Haudenosaunee museum and education center on its shore can point the way to a brighter future.

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