



The Skanonh Great Law of Peace Center on Onondaga Lake.

# Great Law of Peace Center Symposium

"The Great Law of Peace that was founded here at least 1,000 years ago had a tremendous influence not just on the Haudenosaunee but on our founding fathers, our democracy, and on the women's movement in upstate New York."

~ Philip P. Arnold, associate professor of religion and founding director of the Great Law of Peace Center

There is a story that surrounds Onondaga Lake in Syracuse that's gone mostly untold for centuries – a saga of powerful nations and rivals, peace and democracy, and creation and the natural environment. It's the story of the Haudenosaunee, the indigenous people of Central New York, that's been overshadowed by a European narrative—until now.

A collaborative group, including participants from the Onondaga Nation, the College of Arts and Sciences at Syracuse University and other local academic institutions, and the Onondaga Historical Association (OHA), with support from Onondaga County, is working to create a center of learning about Haudenosaunee history, culture, and traditions on the shores of Onondaga Lake. The center will also support greater academic understanding about indigenous peoples through such events as an upcoming Ray Smith Symposium, "Listening to the Wampum," in November.

The new Skā•noñh (Skanonh) – Great Law of Peace Center will be housed at the former Sainte Marie among the Iroquois facility, an interpretive center of the 17th-century Jesuit mission that settled in the territory of the Onondaga Nation, a member of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. The site is owned by Onondaga County and will be operated by OHA.

Most fittingly, the Skanonh Center will be located at the site of the founding centuries ago of the initial five-nation confederacy—Cayugas, Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, and Senecas – which was established through the Great Law of Peace oral constitution on the shores of Onondaga Lake. Skanonh is an Onondaga greeting meaning "peace and wellness".

"This is the Onondaga heartland and heartland of the Haudenosaunee, 'the people of the long house.' This is the opportunity to tell their story," says Philip P. Arnold, associate professor of religion in the College of Arts and Sciences and founding director of the Great Law of Peace Center. "The Great Law of Peace that was founded here at least 1,000 years ago had a tremendous influence not just on the Haudenosaunee but on our founding fathers, our democracy, and on the women's movement in upstate New York. Culturally speaking, it's much more significant than the Jesuit story."

The center will highlight the Haudenosaunee through interactive permanent and changing exhibitions, artwork, and various forms of media. It will discuss such topics as the Haudenosaunee account of creation, the interwoven history of the Haudenosaunee and the United States, and the harsh penalties placed upon Native Americans.



"So many people don't know that we exist, and they have been taught that we are past tense, that we 'were' in this area along with many unflattering 'facts' about us as a people," says Onondaga Clan Mother Wendy Gonyea, who is a member of the Skanohh Advisory Committee. "Today we are speaking out, finally correcting some of those negative stereotypes."

The center will also showcase a shared interest in the environment. "All of our ceremonies are determined by what is happening in the natural world. We have responsibilities to care for all parts of our world—all that sustains us," Gonyea says.

The idea for the center took off after Arnold, whose wife, Sandy Bigtree, is a member of the Mohawk Nation, submitted a letter to the editor to *The Post-Standard* in 2012 in which he proposed a new educational center at the site. Shortly after the letter was published, Gregg Tripoli, OHA executive director, contacted him to begin a collaboration.

Tripoli had earlier been approached by Onondaga County about a plan to reinvigorate the Sainte Marie facility. He also was looking to focus on some programming on the native people of Central New York but needed an educational element for added support. "I didn't even know Phil, but I immediately knew we needed to get together because we both have the same vision," Tripoli says.



An advisory board, including members of the Onondaga Nation and representatives from SU's College of Arts and Sciences, the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, Le Moyne College, Onondaga Community College, and Empire State College, was soon established. Along with organizing funding, the advisory committee is working with planners to design the center, which will also feature a café, gift store, and activity trails.

University students will also have a role to play at the center. Arnold believes the center could be an important source for apprenticeship opportunities for Haudenosaunee Promise Scholarship students or students in museum studies or education. There will also be opportunities for students to assist with organizing events.

That connection among academic institutions, local government, and the Onondaga Nation, along with its Native American perspective, make this new center unique. "This is a center where issues of peace are dealt with and the very collaborative nature of it and the partners involved speak to that issue," Tripoli says.

While the center is scheduled to open in 2014, its educational initiatives began this year with two events showcasing Haudenosaunee culture. The Haudenosaunee Wooden Stick Lacrosse Expo was held September 28-29 at the Onondaga Lake Park ball fields.

Lacrosse (Deyhontsigwa'ehs), a sport originated by Native Americans, plays a powerful role in Haudenosaunee tradition, as it was played during the founding of the Great Law of Peace at the lake. "Lacrosse in its traditional form is a ceremonial act that brings with it responsibilities and connects human beings through the playing of the game," Arnold says.

The event featured exhibition games, with players using traditional wooden sticks and leather balls; lacrosse stick-making demonstrations; native craft vendors; dancers; and lacrosse clinics hosted by professional athletes from the Iroquois Nationals and Onondaga Redhawks.

In November, the center sponsored a conference dedicated to "Listening to the Wampum," in which historians, scholars, and Onondaga Nation members will reflect on wampum as a part of oral history. Wampum are white and purple shell beads that are woven into belts and strings to commemorate exchanges, agreements and treaties. Specifically, the events focused on a wampum that records the history of the contact of the Jesuits and the Onondaga Nation in the mid-17th century.



The Remembrance Belt, third from left, was the subject of this fall's Ray Smith Symposium.

The conference included a "reading" of the wampum belt in the Peter Graham Scholarly Commons, E.S. Bird Library. It was held as a Ray Smith Symposium in the College of Arts and Sciences and part of the 2013 Syracuse Symposium. Another event at Le Moyne College will bring together an Onondaga Nation member and a Jesuit priest to compare the accounts of the first meeting between Jesuits and

the Onondaga. The center will also be host to works of art and replicas of wampum belts as part of the conference.

"If you read any account of Haudenosaunee history, they virtually always rely on textual accounts written by Europeans," Arnold says. "The Onondaga tell a very different story and we want those two stories to be spoken together. That one wampum belt will help us to understand the gaps in history as it has been interpreted thus far."

—Kathleen Haley