

## ***Burial Ground or Ball Field? Past May Clash With Future***

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### **Body**

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For as long as anyone can remember, farmers have grown hay and corn on 35 acres of fertile flatland by the Black Creek in northwestern New Jersey. But a court fight is now focusing on a time far beyond memory. Was the site an Indian burial ground centuries before white settlers arrived? Or was it a village, or simply a busy hunting ground?

Since late May, a state judge has been sorting out competing claims about the site's history and laying the foundation for a decision to either preserve the land as a sacred burial site or allow it to be transformed with 147 adjacent acres into a 21st-century recreation center with baseball and soccer fields, tennis and basketball courts, hiking trails, an amphitheater and a skating rink.

The rivals in the court fight are, on one side, the town officials in Vernon, where the now-vacant 35-acre site sits in a valley surrounded by some of New Jersey's highest ridges, and on the other, a 53-year-old local archaeologist, Rick Patterson, and his allies, the Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape Indians of New Jersey. The dispute started after the town bought the entire 182-acre site last year for \$1.1 million.

The judge, Kenneth MacKenzie of State Superior Court in Morristown, initially barred the town from disturbing any part of the site. In early June, he narrowed his ban, telling the town to leave only the 35-acre Black Creek site undisturbed.

But yesterday, Vernon officials got some good news, as Judge MacKenzie granted their request for a full-scale archaeological study of the site to test Mr. Patterson's claims that the land was both a burial ground and a Lenni-Lenape village and manufacturing site.

The judge also rejected the town's motion to remove the Lenni-Lenapes, whose tribal headquarters are located in Bridgeton, in southern New Jersey, from the case.

Both sides said they were pleased that Judge MacKenzie had ordered an independent study.

"They're making claims this is a burial ground without substance in fact," said Mayor John Logan of Vernon. "This is a search for facts now. There's a lot of speculation filling a void created by a lack of facts."

For now, Mr. Logan said, the town is willing to concede only that the site may have some archaeological value because of the discovery of arrowheads and other artifacts in the cornfields. He said he recently talked to a farmer who had worked the fields for 60 years, tilling to a depth of three feet, and found many arrowheads but no human bones.

Mr. Patterson said the new study would prove what he has believed since he started finding artifacts on the site in 1989 -- that the Lenapes settled there as long ago as 8,000 B.C. He said he has found about 500 arrowheads and

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spear points, about 500 stones used as hammers, knives and grinding implements, and several thousand pieces of pottery, flint chips and millings.

Mr. Patterson said the flint, found on a plateau about a half-mile from what he believes was a Lenape village, was evidence of "a phenomenal prehistoric flint mining complex." He said he believed that the Lenapes used the flint to manufacture their tools.

Mr. Patterson said he never disturbed the site, and found the artifacts on the ground. His strongest evidence of a burial ground, he said, is his discovery in the early 1990's of an effigy stone -- a small, highly polished black oval stone with a flat bottom and the carvings of two eyes, two nostrils and a mouth.

"An effigy is only buried with the remains of a chieftain or a princess," said Pat Rossello, a member of the Lenni-Lenape tribe who is now involved in the court fight. "I'm almost 100 percent sure there's a chieftain buried there somewhere."

Ms. Rossello said the Bridgeton tribe knew nothing about the site until friends of Mr. Patterson called members a few months ago. After that, Judge MacKenzie allowed them to join Mr. Patterson's lawsuit.

Vernon officials take a dim view of the Lenapes' involvement. "They didn't even know where Vernon was until they were invited in by Patterson's supporters," Mr. Logan said. "Now we have Indians coming to our meetings trying to stop us from building ball fields."

Since joining the suit, the Lenapes have sponsored symposiums in Vernon in hopes of teaching residents about Indian customs and culture.

"We don't want the land," Ms. Rossello said. "We just want it memorialized perpetually so nothing can be built there."

She said the Lenapes hope that one day a museum can be built nearby. "There's something to learn there for all of us," she said.

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