

BLACK CREEK NATIVE AMERICAN INDIAN SITE IN NEW JERSEY LISTED TO HISTORIC REGISTER

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Body

AFTER A YEAR-LONG COURT BATTLE AND AN INTENSE preservation effort, the Black Creek Native American site has been listed on the New Jersey Register of Historic Places and has been for-warded to the keeper of the National Register of Historic Places for listing.

The forty-acre parcel of land where more than 16,000 Native American artifacts, pottery, and stone tools representing 10,000 years of history and culture of native peoples were discovered has been saved from destruction, honoring New Jersey's indigenous people, the Lenape. The Black Creek Site sits within a 182-acre tract owned by the municipality of Vernon Township, New Jersey, which bought the land to build ball fields and a park. It is considered one of the most important archaeological and cultural sites in the tri-state area.

Archaeologists confirm the Black Creek Site was inhabited continuously by the Lenape and other Native Americans for more than 10,000 years before European settlers forced them from the area in the 1600s. Artifacts found at the site date back to the Early Archaic Period, around 8,000 BC, to the Late Woodland Period of the 1600-1700s, the time of contact with Europeans.

After pleading with the township government to hear the facts, see the history that the site represents, and preserve the site -- and being lied to over and over by the same governing body -- archaeologist Rick Patterson, the person who discovered the Black Creek Site, and I knew we had to take the matter out of the local governing body's hands. On February 1, 2001, after Vernon Mayor John Logan promised to develop a plan to build the park around the Black Creek Site, I told him at a public meeting that if he did not keep his promise, I would search until I found the native people who had an affiliation

Sarah Curtis

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to the site who would join us in our preservation effort.

As he had done many times before after making promises, the mayor walked out of that room that night and did the complete opposite. The town engineer was directed to draw a plan that completely destroyed the Black Creek Site, on which they proposed to construct football and soccer fields, an amphitheater, a parking lot, and concession stands. That same month, my letter to the editor was published in local newspapers and drew the attention of town residents and area citizens.

"Imagine telling a child that kicking a soccer ball is more important than 10,000 years worth of Native American history and culture," the letter began. It hardly seems possible that more than one year has passed since I first wrote that letter and embarked on my journey to search for native people who would assist us in our effort to preserve the Black Creek Site. I sent e-mail messages to all Native American groups that I could find on the Internet, asking for their interest and support to preserve the site in Vernon Township.

After dozens of letters without any success, I quickly approached the point of hopelessness at the thought of the town-ship government bulldozing the site to build a huge athletic complex. On the morning of April 2, 2001, I asked the Creator in desperation where I might find the Native Americans to whom such a site would surely be even more important than it was to me, a non-native. "Where are the native people?" I cried in desperation. I had searched for weeks and had grown quite weary of the many lies and tactics of my town government. I was appalled at their lack of interest or concern for history. The town's scheme for destruction was advancing. The days were numbered.

It was then that my prayer was answered instantly! As I looked down at my morning newspaper, I read the headline "Census reports 20,000 Native Americans in New Jersey." The article referred to the number of native people in the state, among them the Nanticoke Lenni Lenape Indians of New Jersey. I immediately put down the newspaper and went to the Internet to search for an address. Upon finding it, I sent e-mail to Chief Mark Gould. That very day, the Lenape were having their tribal council meeting and my e-mail caught Chief Gould's attention. He forwarded my e-mail to Tribal Councilman Urie Ridgeway, who contacted me immediately. Urie came to Vernon Township and met with Rick Patterson and me. We gave him a slide presentation of the site and the thousands of artifacts found on the surface. He saw the spirit stone, the effigy found at the site. After the slide presentation, Rick told Urie "Not one inch, not one foot of this site will be destroyed for ball fields. "When Urie responded, "Not one millimeter will be destroyed," we knew we now had a team effort and were on our way to save the site!

After the slide presentation, we took Urie to the meeting of the Vernon

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Township Council, where Urie gave compelling testimony to the council, urging the preservation of the site. Also in attendance at the meeting that evening were members of the American Indian Movement from Massachusetts and New Hampshire, whom Urie had called, and they came immediately to support us.

Today, after months of tears, laughter, and joy, newly appointed New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) Commissioner Bradley Campbell did a courageous and honorable thing in the early evening of April 1, 2002. Just before the Vernon Township Council was set to award a contract to a firm that would build football fields at the Black Creek Site, Campbell listed the entire site on the New Jersey Register of Historic places.

On December 5, 2001, in a room filled with more than 100 Native Americans from New York, New Jersey, Delaware, and Pennsylvania, the hearing of the New Jersey Historic Review Board took place. The purpose of the hearing was to decide on the nomination of the site to the state and national registers.

Gregory Werkheiser, the young pro bono attorney from the prestigious Washington D.C. law firm of Piper Rudnick Marbury & Wolfe was there, representing the Nanticoke Lenni Lenape and our preservation effort. The geologist whom the Township of Vernon had hired to discredit the Black Creek Site was also there. The geologist spoke incoherently about his own importance for more than 30 minutes, after which he attempted to tell the review board the Black Creek Site was not very significant. Undaunted by the geologist's testimony, and even telling him they did not agree with his science, the review board was overwhelmingly convinced by Patterson, the Lenape, and Werkheiser that the Black Creek Site was an important cultural resource and too important to lose for mere ball fields.

The historic review board made the recommendation to then NJDEP Commissioner Robert Shinn to list the site. Forty-five days later, at the end of his tenure, Commissioner Shinn listed only half of the site and remanded a hotly contested portion of it back to the review board for further consideration. In February 2002, Bradley Campbell was appointed to the position of NJDEP Commissioner. We pleaded our case to him, quickly informing him of the significance of the Black Creek Site. The reconsideration of the remaining acreage was scheduled to take place on April 3. The Vernon Township Council, at the last minute, came up with another scheme. Knowing that the only thing that could stop the listing of a municipally-owned site to the registers of historic places was to have a contract in place for development, the council put the remaining acreage of the Black Creek Site out to bid and scheduled a public meeting at 7 p.m. on April 1 to open the bids and award a contract.

In a dramatic move on the afternoon of April 1, Commissioner Campbell contacted the Vernon Council and asked that the action on the bid be postponed until after the Historic Review Board meeting on April 3. Commissioner Campbell

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told the Town Council if he did not hear from them about his request by 6 p.m., he would list the remaining acreage to the historic register. Failing to hear from the Town Council, at 6 p.m. that day, Commissioner Campbell sealed the fate of the Black Creek Site and listed it in its entirety to the New Jersey Register of Historic Places. Commissioner Campbell granted the prehistoric Lenape settlement site in Vernon emergency historic status, thwarting the Vernon Township Council's "back-door maneuver" to build football fields on the site.

In listing the site, Commissioner Campbell said, "This is one of very few sites that recognize the presence and historic significance of New Jersey's original indigenous people. The department NJDEP felt strongly that we ought to protect those resources." In a letter to Vernon Mayor John Logan, Campbell accused the township of trying to "undermine the historic review process" by forging ahead with the construction contract over his agency's objections. Campbell wrote that the construction contract "would scuttle the process and defeat any attempt to protect important cultural resources."

For the most part, much of the controversy over the Black Creek Site is over, but we will not blink. We made a vow to protect, to see that "Not one inch, not one foot" of the site is destroyed, and we will continue to honor that vow. In the meantime, this effort has established many relationships and has served as a unifying point for the Lenape throughout the nation. We had the support of the Delaware in Oklahoma, the Munsee in Canada, the Lenape in Delaware and Pennsylvania, and the Lenape in North and South Jersey.

"Native people from New Jersey to California celebrate this great victory for the preservation of our human heritage," said Chief Mark Gould after Campbell listed the site.

The Black Creek Site is one of only-four Native American sites on the New Jersey Register of Historic Places. More than 1,600 sites on the register represent European and colonial influence. Through the unified efforts of native people and concerned citizens, we can have a strong voice in restoring identity and purpose for such historic places as the Black Creek Site. My sincere thanks to the Nanticoke Lenni Lenape of New Jersey--especially Mark Gould, Urie Ridgeway, Patricia Rossello, and their tribal administrator Earl

Evans--to Gregory Werkheiser and the firm of Piper Rudnick Marbury. & Wolfe, TO

FRED WERKHEISER FOR SENDING HIS NEPHEW GREGORY WERKHEISER TO US, to Rick Patterson, to all the archaeologists who supported our effort and testified on our behalf, to Matt Brown of The Record for his excellent reporting on the Black Creek Site, to the American Indian Movement, the New Jersey Historic Preservation Office, to the Historic Review Board, to Commissioner Bradley Campbell, to the hundreds of Vernon residents and residents throughout New

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Jersey, and to the Lenape and Delaware tribes across America for making this happen. Wanishi.

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Graphic

Photograph, The Spirit Stone the effigy that was found at the Black CreekSite.

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