

Old Lenape village suffers sneak attack: New Jersey township wants to build ball fields

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Body

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By Jim Adams

TODAY STAFF

BLACK CREEK VILLAGE, N.J. - Town bulldozers started to level a 10,000-year-old Lenni Lenape settlement the last week in May as archaeologist Richard Patterson stood in court battling to save it.

And on May 30, Patterson and two reporters were arrested on the orders of the Vernon Township council as they tried to document the damage.

A temporary restraining order from the Sussex County Superior Court prevented total desecration, but the fight to preserve the Black Creek Village archaeological site is shaping up as a classic development-preservation clash.

The site, which Patterson says is the heart of a prehistoric mining complex showing 10 millennia of artifacts, lies on land on which the Vernon town council wants to build baseball fields. In spite of protests from Patterson and survivors of the widely dispersed Lenni Lenape, the council tried to push the project through.

It even broke its own agreement to wait for alternative plans, said Gregory Werkheiser, a Washington, D.C., attorney who entered the fray.

He said the town leaders "seem totally insensitive to what it is they're doing. They don't seem to care."

Long before the bulldozers went in, the council scheduled a June 1 hearing on a plan offered by the Vernon Civic Association to save the site. The association offered alternate land to replace the 23-acre site, said Urie

Sarah Curtis

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Ridgeway, a local member of the Nanticoke Lenni Lenape.

The council gave the Civic Association a June 1 deadline to submit its plan, but started work a week early, Ridgeway said.

As outrage swept the Lenape community, Patterson went to court for a temporary restraining order, acting as his own attorney. Werkheiser joined the case soon after, representing the Nanticoke tribe.

The restraining order expires on June 6, and the New Jersey court will hold a hearing on motions for a longer term injunction against the town.

Speaking two hours after his arrest, Patterson called Black Creek Village "a large site, showing evidence of 10,000 years of inhabitation." He said it was a center for mining stone tips from several large chert veins.

"We have point styles from 8000 B.C.," he said, and signs of continuous inhabitation "right up to contact with the European intrusive civilizations in the form of trade beads."

A professional field archaeologist with a consulting firm, Patterson said he had been mapping the site for 10 years. "I live in Vernon Township in the Valley of Black Creek. This has all been a labor of love on my part."

He said he was arrested for trespassing by Vernon town police as he took two news photographers to the damaged site, which he said was on public park land.

He and the newsmen were released shortly afterward. "They could have issued a warning, but the police had orders to arrest."

Asked to explain the behavior of the town council, he said, "If you wanted to cast a really horrible B movie with wasicu (white) killers, that would be the township council.

"It's unbelievable, but it's happening."

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