

# Canandaigua sign recognizes Skenoh Island

Change reflects goal to correct 'wrongs' of past

**Mike Murphy**

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CANANDAIGUA — The name was officially changed to Skenoh Island in 2021.

Two years later, a new sign erected last month at the end of the City Pier details a short history of the tiny island and state wildlife management area on Canandaigua Lake that once was known as Squaw Island.

The Skenoh Island name is posted for all to see.

The removal and eventual replacement of the original sign was a necessity since the name of the island was changed, according to Edward Randolph, who was among those who pushed for a change in the island's name.

"I am glad for the context in which the new sign places the island's history into focus," Randolph said in an email. "It references the Seneca people, who originally lived in this area, the ones who helped preserve the island, and the legend of Seneca people who sought refuge on the island."

The original sign, which has been donated to the Ontario County Historical Society, noted the original name, which, to put it mildly, is not considered complimentary.

Whether it was meant to have a negative connotation or not, it carried that negative connotation, Canandaigua City Manager John Goodwin said.

"I know that some folks say it's changing history," Goodwin said. "The sign is pretty much the same as it was when it was there. It just has a different name."

**A refresher: Why was the name changed?**

In the Mohawk language, the term "squaw" refers to a woman's private parts and is considered derogatory.

Randolph had contacted the city and town of Canandaigua to begin their process to approve the name change. The name Skenoh — pronounced scan-



**Skenoh Island is the smallest wildlife management area in the state. The island is located in the northwest corner of Canandaigua Lake. The island has been renamed, Skenoh, because of the offensive meaning of the former name.**

TINA MACINTYRE-YEE, SHAWN DOWD/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE



**A new sign for Skenoh Island is now up on Canandaigua's City Pier. MIKE MURPHY/CANANDAIGUA DAILY MESSENGER**

oh and translated to either well-being or health — was suggested by G. Peter Jemison, now retired historic site manager at the Ganondagan State Historic Site in Victor.

bration in 2013 to support projects like this that ordinarily might not be done, funded the new sign.

The committee has helped fund community-based projects such as murals on downtown buildings and a flagpole at the Canandaigua Emergency Squad building, among other beautification projects.

"We felt this was something the Centennial Committee could get behind," Palumbo said.

**More Skenoh Island details**

The new sign, as did the old one, not only notes the island's history and, perhaps, legend, but also the efforts of people like Clifford Murphy who helped save the island from erosion decades ago.

The sign notes Canandaigua Lake is part of the homeland of the Haudenosaunee, or Seneca, Confederacy, and the island, according to legend, was a sanctuary for indigenous women and children seeking refuge during the "military invasion" of their homeland by U.S. Gens. John Sullivan and James Clinton.

And the sign also mentions the island's unusual geological formations called "water biscuits."

Goodwin, paraphrasing a key line from Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet:" "A rose is just as sweet by any other name," and so is a historical sign.

"The history is still there. We do celebrate the history, the good and the bad and the legendary," Goodwin said. "It's part of the history of that island, and it's part of Ontario County's history and Canandaigua's history. We want to honor it appropriately."

Randolph acknowledges that while not likely historically factual, there is nothing wrong with preserving legends as long as they are placed in appropriate context.

"This is what makes up a community, its people, its legends, its stories and its history. The forever progress forward to better ourselves from mistakes or issues we may have had in the past defines what it means to be an American," Randolph emailed. "History will make hypocrites of us all. This is not a bad thing, it only means we are seeking to better ourselves as a people, over each generation."

The New York State Geographic Names Committee recommended approval of the change, as did the New York State Museum and the commissioner of the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

The U.S. Board on Geographic Names approved the name change two years ago.

Back in 2021, Randolph said, "From the start this was all about correcting the wrongs of the past."

The intent behind the change was similar to what New York school districts that had Native American nicknames and logos, including Canandaigua, have had to do. As a result, Canandaigua is no longer the Braves but the Gray Wolves.

And the island is Skenoh.

Jemison added about the island's new name at the time: "It's a small change, but I think an important one. I hope people will accept the reasons for it."

**About the new Skenoh Island sign**

No city taxpayer dollars were used for the sign, according to Mayor Bob Palumbo. Instead, the Canandaigua Centennial Endowment, which was established during the city's centennial cele-