

# Harvard latest to repatriate objects to Oneidas

**Amy Neff Roth**

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Representatives of the Oneida Indian Nation traveled to Boston this past week to collect the remains of seven of their ancestors from Harvard University's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. The remains and associated funerary objects were handed over to the Oneida Indian Nation representatives at a repatriation ceremony Tuesday.

"Repatriation is a solemn undertaking," Oneida Indian Nation Representative Ray Halbritter, a Harvard Law School graduate, told the crowd. "The emotions it brings are hard to describe. There is sadness for our ancestors, whose rest was disturbed and whose dignity has been denied. There is joy at the knowledge that they will return to our community to be laid to rest with love and respect.

"And there is hope that with every repatriation, we are addressing the harms committed against Native people and setting the stage for a world in which they will be unthinkable."

The ancestors and their funerary objects were buried at Brier Hill in St. Lawrence County. They were removed in 1878 by Samuel W. Gamman, the assistant director of herpetology and ichthyology at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology. Herpetology refers to the study of reptiles and ichthyology to the study of fish.

It took three years of talks to bring about the repatriation. They are continuing to work together to identify more remains and artifacts in the museum collection that should be returned to the Oneida people, officials said.

Under the 1990 federal Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, museums and universities must work with Native American tribes to determine what they have in their collections that should be repatriated. The law covers human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects and objects of cultural patrimony.

Between 1994 and November 2024, the Oneida Indian Nation has repatriated more than 90 ancestors and more than 4,500 associated funerary objects by working with 13 institutions, according to the Nation. By year's end, those totals are expected to increase to more than 120 ancestors and more than 9,500 associated funerary objects through 15 institutions. The repatriations expected this month include one with Colgate University in Hamilton.

The Oneida Indian Nation has dedicated employees in its legal department who reach out to museums and universities for information about their collections and work on repatriation, he said.

"These aren't easy issues always," said Joel Barkin, the Oneida Indian Nation's vice president for strategic communications and community engagement. "You're dealing with many-hundreds-of-years-old pieces of sometimes remains or cultural items that have changed possession. Sometimes there's clear records; sometimes there's not and you have to track it down.

"The process does genuinely take some time, as it should."

The huge number of remains, funerary objects and other culturally significant objects ended up in museum collections for study, display and analysis robbed Native Americans of far more than the physical items taken, Halbritter pointed out in his remarks.

"Too often the history recorded and taught did not reflect our lived experiences and the science that was developed was frequently a thinly veiled attempt to uphold white supremacy," he said. "All of this helped make possible the implicit assumption that Native Americans were less than human.

"Once it is possible to dehumanize a group in this way, there is no reason to ask their permission or consider their rights. With this assumption, cultural institutions were able to build massive collections of human remains and cultural artifacts that did not belong to them."