

# Seneca Nation of Indians

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## PRESIDENT'S OFFICE

August 6, 2020

To Whom it may concern:

Nya:weh Skenoh, greeting from the Seneca Nation. I have been asked to respond to the word "Squaw".

The word "squaw" has a long and varied usage. The origins of the word can be traced back to the Algonquian peoples along the coasts of New England in the 1600s. Linguists have traced the word root to Mohawk origins. The meaning of the word has been defined differently over time. In some instances, it was used to describe a comely woman, a young unmarried woman, and in more derogatory terms, it can mean "whore" or reducing a woman to her genitalia. No matter how one chooses to look at the definition of the word, it is used in derogatory terms. No one in the historical record has used it in a positive way towards women.

Over the last couple of decades researchers and linguists have leaned towards a reframing of the word to refer to the totality of a woman or simply a young woman; however, that has not always been the case. Explicit statements that the word meant "female genitals" gained currency in the 1970s. In 1973, researchers Sanders and Peek discussed its deeper origins and usage:


"That curious concept of 'squaw', the enslaved, demeaned, voiceless child bearer, existed and exists only in the mind of the non-Native American and is probably a French corruption of the Iroquois [Mohawk] word *otsiskwa* meaning 'female sexual parts', a word almost clinical both denotatively and connotatively. The corruption suggests nothing about the Native American's attitude toward women; it does indicate the *wasichu's* [Lakota for white person] view of Native American women in particular if not all women in general."

Typically, the word is understood by Native people as a racial slur on her or his person, family, community, and/or heritage. It is not a term of endearment, nor used in a friendly manner. We do believe that some non-Native peoples, unaware of its derogatory connotations, occasionally use the term out of ignorance of the meaning it holds for Native peoples.

When stereotypes are used they dehumanize others. In this case, the continued use of this word dehumanizes ALL Native women. Indigenous women face serious issues of marginalization and oppression. Currently, Native communities are tackling unsolved cases of murdered and missing Indigenous women, which has been an uphill battle. A word like "squaw", as simple and innocuous as it might seem, undermines efforts to raise awareness and to resolve those ongoing concerns in our communities.

While the term was part of the common vernacular of Euro-Americans during the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, should the word continue to linger in referencing Native women and persist as names for geographical and historical natural features of a shared multi-cultural society?

Respectfully,

  
Rickey L. Armstrong, Sr., President



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To: Fox Chapel Borough Council and Fox Chapel Borough Task Force  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

September 6, 2020

cc: Mrs. Michele Leonard

Re: The Use of the Word "Squaw" in Pittsburgh Area Place Names

Greetings,

It has recently come to my attention that an editorial I wrote more than two decades ago ("Reclaiming the Word 'Squaw' in the Name of the Ancestors," *Native Web*, November 1999) is being used, by the Fox Chapel Borough Council and Fox Chapel Borough Task Force, as a counter-argument to calls to eliminate the word "squaw" from place names in Pittsburgh (e.g., Squaw Run Road, Old Squaw Road, Squaw Run Creek).

First, I must point out that this piece of writing was *not* a research article, and it was never intended to stand as an authoritative statement of research findings; it was merely my personal opinion at that time. My words do not, by any stretch of the imagination, represent the opinions of *all* other Native American people, or of *all* Algonquian language-speakers. I wrote that piece when I was a much younger woman, learning about Indigenous languages while researching colonial histories. My goal was to ensure that Native American histories were accurately represented and that Native languages were accurately spoken, since the morpheme "skwa" did, in fact, derive from colonial encounters with speakers of Algonquian languages.

I did not foresee the degree to which my words would be used as weapons against other Native women. My editorial was emphatically *not* written to support the notion that non-Native American people should continue to freely and routinely use the word "squaw" in any context, since, in the present, it is widely perceived as a racially-inflected pejorative slur that denigrates Native American women.<sup>1</sup> My editorial was emphatically *not* meant to be used as a justification to keep the place name "squaw" intact, especially in locations where it simply replicates a sloppy rendition of popular versions of local Native history.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, I am appalled to learn that residents of Fox Chapel Borough have weaponized my words, without my consent, to level personal attacks against local Native American elders and activists – specifically, Mrs. Michele Leonard – in and around Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. This is completely unacceptable. I am deeply offended to hear that an outdated opinion, in an editorial I wrote when I was only an undergraduate student many years ago, is being used as ammunition to prolong this argument. As a simple matter of research ethics, speaking from my professional position as an Associate Professor and Coordinator of Native American and Indigenous Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, I would never condone utilizing *any* undergraduate student's written opinion (even, in retrospect, my own), as though it constituted an informed source to settle a question concerning interpretations of public history.

That being said, let me briefly speak more specifically to the matter of place names in and around Pittsburgh. Here, the most basic historical question to ask is: which Native nation's history are we talking about?

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, William Bright, "The Sociolinguistics of the S-Word: Squaw in American Place Names," *Names: A Journal of Onomastics* 48 (3-4) (2000): 207-216; <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1179/nam.2000.48.3-4.207>

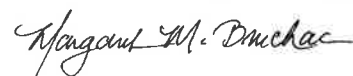
<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, that 1999 editorial was widely circulated and posted to other internet websites, without my consent. The editors at *Native Web* have removed it from their website at my request, but the site *Manataka.org* continues to post it, despite my requests to remove it. That out-dated editorial does not reflect my current professional research standards.

It is my understanding that the popular history of the use of the word “squaw” in that region is vaguely associated with white colonial settler naming traditions. Small rivers and creeks were sometimes called “runs,” and “Squaw Run Creek” is locally perceived to be in some way connected to a daughter of the Seneca Chief Guyasuta (1724-1794). It was Guyasuta who guided the young George Washington to a fateful meeting with the French at Fort LeBoeuf, at the outset of the French and Indian War.<sup>3</sup> Since Guyasuta was a Seneca leader among the Haudenosaunee (Six Nations Iroquois), it makes no sense whatsoever to use a disparaging term adapted from an Algonquian language to refer to a women from his nation. The phrase “squaw run” takes on even more ominous overtones when we consider the bloody history of colonial relations in the region.

As you must realize, Guyasuta lived in a tumultuous time, when colonial leaders were seeking to fracture Indigenous alliances and conduct warfare as a means to acquire Indigenous territory. He negotiated with Washington, with Virginia Governor John Murray (Lord Dunmore), and with Pennsylvania land speculator John Connolly in the lead-up to Dunmore’s War, hoping to secure Haudenosaunee safety and sovereignty in their traditional territories in present-day New York and Pennsylvania. That conflict pitted Native people against one another in what was then considered the Ohio frontier, and produced fraught treaties (e.g., the 1778 Treaty of Fort Pitt) that failed to preserve Indigenous lands.<sup>4</sup> In the aftermath, white colonial settler vigilantes formed into backcountry militias that wreaked horrific violence against Native peoples of multiple nations. The most heinous of these was the 1782 massacre of more than ninety Moravian Christian Lenape (including men, women, youths, and infants) at Gnadenhütten (just west of Pittsburgh) by Pennsylvania militia men under Lieutenant Colonel David Williamson.<sup>5</sup> In this historical context, the phrase “squaw run” is more than merely pejorative; it evokes hideous echoes of attacks on Native female noncombatants.

So, speaking from my educated position as an anthropologist, historian, and museum consultant, I see no logical, cultural, or historical reason whatsoever to keep using the name “squaw” (and especially the name “squaw run”) on any parks, roads, or other locations in Pittsburgh. Your use of that word honors and preserves nothing of historical value. Removing it will not do any damage whatsoever to our understandings of local Native American history. Keeping it, however, does serious damage to our understandings of Native American people and languages, and causes obvious offense to surviving Native American communities today. Most importantly, I offer this advice – respect the fact that Pittsburgh is situated on Indigenous Seneca territory. So, when the Seneca Nation speaks on this matter, you should listen.

Most sincerely,



Dr. Margaret M. Bruchac  
Associate Professor of Anthropology  
Associate Faculty, Penn Cultural Heritage Center  
Coordinator, Native American & Indigenous Studies Initiative at Penn

UNIVERSITY of PENNSYLVANIA

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<sup>3</sup> For context on the complexity of these conflicts, see Gregory Dowd Evans, *A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745–1815* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1992). Also see Rob Harper, *Unsettling the American West: Violence and State Building in the Ohio Valley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018). Guyasuta and Washington are memorialized in a statue atop Mount Washington - see Jack Doyle, “Point of View: George & Guyasuta,” *The Pop History Dig*: <https://www.pophistorydig.com/topics/george-washington-and-guyasuta/>

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001). On Native mission communities, see A. G. Roeber, ed., *Ethnographies and Exchanges: Native Americans, Moravians, and Catholics in Early America* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Douglas R. Hurt, *The Ohio Frontier: Crucible of the Old Northwest, 1720-1830* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996). Rob Harper, “Looking the other way: the Gnadenhütten massacre and the contextual interpretation of violence,” *William and Mary Quarterly* (2007): 621–644. Also see Earl Nicodemus, “Geo-History: The Gnadenhütten Massacre,” *Waelunk*, Wheeling Heritage (March 27, 2018): <https://waelunk.com/geo-history-gnadenhuten-massacre/>

Hi Mandy,

Thank you for your correspondence and the work you are doing.

I can tell you in no uncertain terms that the word you are trying to remove from public spaces in Pennsylvania is definitely denigrating and offensive. The term also reinforces offensive stereotypes. Here is a link to a statement we issued about the Washington football team: <https://collegefund.org/blog/inside-the-college-fund/re-name-mascots-to-end-harmful-stereotypes/>

Here is also a link to an interview with our president, Cheryl Crazy Bull, discussing the harm mascots do to young people on a program in Cleveland discussing the Cleveland Indians name change: <https://www.ideastream.org/programs/sound-of-ideas/name-change-for-the-cleveland-indians-cleveland-mask-mandate>

Team names and mascots reinforce harmful stereotypes, and research shows that "Indian" sports mascots and derogatory names, whether or not deemed "offensive," have serious psychological and social impacts on Native youth. By fetishizing and monetizing Native images, Native people, particularly youth, experience low self-esteem and exacerbated historical trauma.

This harm manifests in American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) youth through suicide. The Centers for Disease Control research shows that AIAN youth ages 15-34 have the highest suicide rates in the country. And negative stereotypes also put American Indian and Alaska Natives at risk of being victims of a hate crime at the hands of someone of a different race at two times the rate of other groups, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. The name you are seeking to remove in your community also denigrates Native women, who are murdered at a rate 10 times higher than other ethnicities. Murder is the third leading cause of death for Native women (Centers for Disease Control). (Check out this web site: <https://www.nativewomenswilderness.org/mmiw>)

Native youth, like all youngsters, need positive role models to succeed in college and in life, not outmoded stereotypes. Research shows that when students have positive role models in classrooms, they perform better academically and have fewer other issues. And a recent Gallup survey of tribal college and university (TCU) alumni shows that students that attend these culturally based higher education institutions on or near Indian reservations perform better because they are surrounded by role models while learning in an environment that honors and values their cultures.

Advocates for keeping racist mascots or names cite tradition and the fact that they are "honoring" Native peoples.

To change harmful attitudes towards Natives and encourage healthy Native communities, a better way to honor American Indians and Alaska Natives is to listen to individual Native voices, recognize our vibrant cultures, traditions, and languages; and incorporate them and positive imagery, along with and Native histories and contributions into all education curriculum, not just TCUs, so that Native youth and all Americans learn about these histories and so that Native students feel welcome in all education environments. Finally, education institutions, sporting organizations, and society at large can honor Native peoples by recognizing that Native Americans are still here and are an integral part of contemporary society.

I hope this helps!

Best,  
Dina Horwedel



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NATIONAL CONGRESS OF AMERICAN INDIANS

THE NATIONAL CONGRESS OF AMERICAN INDIANS

RESOLUTION #PHX-03-017

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Title: Support for Retaining the Names of Piastewa Peak and Piastewa Freeway to Honor Private First Class Lori Ann Piastewa

WHEREAS, we, the members of the National Congress of American Indians of the United States, invoking the divine blessing of the Creator upon our efforts and purposes, in order to preserve for ourselves and our descendants the inherent sovereign rights of our Indian nations, rights secured under Indian treaties and agreements with the United States, and all other rights and benefits to which we are entitled under the laws and Constitution of the United States, to enlighten the public toward a better understanding of the Indian people and their way of life, to preserve Indian cultural values, and otherwise promote the health, safety and welfare of the Indian people, do hereby establish and submit the following resolution; and

WHEREAS, the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) was established in 1944 and is the oldest and largest national organization of American Indian and Alaska Native tribal governments; and

WHEREAS, Private First Class Lori Ann Piastewa gave her life in Operation Iraqi Freedom; and

WHEREAS, PFC Lori Ann Piastewa was the first American Indian woman in the United States armed forces to be killed in combat; and

WHEREAS, the United States has hailed PFC Lori Ann Piastewa as a national hero; and

WHEREAS, Arizona Governor Janet Napolitano and the tribal Nations in Arizona—with the consent of the Piastewa family and the leadership of the Hopi tribe—urged the Arizona board of geographic names to change the names of Squaw Peak Parkway to Piastewa Peak and Piastewa Freeway, respectively; and

WHEREAS, the word "squaw" is a derivative of a Mohawk word that is a vulgar description of female genitalia; and

WHEREAS, the word "squaw" has been a derogatory term for American Indian women for centuries; and

WHEREAS, the use of the word "squaw" is an example of disrespect for an racism toward Native women, who are often the political and social leaders of our communities; and

WHEREAS, the Executive Council of the NCAI gave its unanimous consent to support the name change to Piastewa Peak and Piastewa Freeway during the General Assembly of the 2003 Mid-Year Session of NCAI.

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the NCAI does hereby honor PFC Lori Ann Piastewa for her sacrifice; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the NCAI rejects the term "squaw" as misogynistic and racist; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the NCAI gives its full support to Arizona

**WHEREAS**, the use of the word "squaw" is an example of disrespect for an racism toward Native women, who are often the political and social leaders of our communities; and

**WHEREAS**, the Executive Council of the NCAI gave its unanimous consent to support the name change to Piastewa Peak and Piastewa Freeway during the General Assembly of the 2003 Mid-Year Session of NCAI.

**NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED**, that the NCAI does hereby honor PFC Lori Ann Piastewa for her sacrifice; and

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, that the NCAI rejects the term "squaw" as misogynistic and racist; and

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, that the NCAI gives its full support to Arizona Governor Napolitano and the sovereign Indian Nations in the State of Arizona for their actions that led to the change of the names of Squaw Peak and Squaw Peak Parkway to Piastewa Peak and Piastewa Freeway; and

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, that the NCAI urges the Arizona board of geographic names to retain the names of Piastewa Peak and Piastewa Freeway in perpetuity; and

**BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED**, that this resolution shall be the policy of the NCAI until it is withdrawn or modified by subsequent resolution.

#### CERTIFICATION

The foregoing resolution was adopted at the 2003 Mid-Year Session of the National Congress of American Indians, held at the Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Gila River Indian Community, in Phoenix, Arizona on June 18, 2003 with a quorum present.



Tex Hall, President

ATTEST:



Juana Majel, Recording Secretary

Adopted by the General Assembly during the 2003 Mid-Year Session of the National Congress of American Indians, held at the Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Gila River Indian Community, in Phoenix, Arizona on June 18, 2003.



**Smithsonian**  
*National Museum of the American Indian*

**National Museum of the American Indian**

Smithsonian Voices > National Museum of the American Indian

**Ending the Use of Racist Mascots and Images**

July 8th, 2020, 3:30PM / BY Kevin Gover and Bill Lomax

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People protest against the name of the Washington, D.C., NFL team before a game between Washington and the Minnesota Vikings. Minneapolis, November 2, 2014. (John McDonnell/The Washington Post via Getty Images)

As the country debates racist symbolism in monuments, racist names and mascots for sports teams, and racially charged images as brands, the conversation has turned to the Washington, D.C., NFL franchise and the announcement that the team will consider changing its name. Unfortunately, some of the new names discussed in the media continue to allude to Native America—under the banner of honoring Native peoples.

The museum strongly believes that Native names, other words associated with Native people, and Native-inspired mascots do not honor Indigenous people, our histories, or our cultures. On the contrary: Any team name or image that evokes Native people emboldens disrespectful fans to continue to paint their faces, don headdresses, and act out faux-Native performances.

The commercial use of images and words that evoke Native cultures perpetuates racism and legitimizes racist acts. As the Washington football team navigates its way forward under pressure from sponsors, the mayor of the city it claims to represent, and many other Americans working to build a fairer society, we strongly support sports teams and other organizations that end the use of Native American imagery depicting racism. Let's get this right.

**Kevin Gover is the director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian and a citizen of the Pawnee Tribe of Oklahoma.**

**Bill Lomax is the chair of the Board of Trustees for the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian and a member of the Gitksan nation.**

*To read more on the impact of Native American team names and mascots, see Kevin Gover's commentary "Dear Dan Snyder: Don't pick a new Native-inspired team name" in the Washington Post.*

**Tags:**

American, Native, Pop Culture



## ASSOCIATION ON AMERICAN INDIAN AFFAIRS

Protecting Sovereignty • Preserving Culture

Educating Youth • Building Capacity

SINCE 1922

August 20, 2020

Councilwoman Mandy Steele  
Fox Chapel Borough Council  
476 Old Mill Road  
Pittsburg, PA 15238  
[Mandy.steele@yahoo.com](mailto:Mandy.steele@yahoo.com)  
*Sent via e-mail only*

Re: Removal of derogatory word

Dear Councilwoman Steele,

Thank you for reaching out to the Association on American Indian Affairs to better understand issues that affect Native American health and welfare. The Association is the oldest non-profit serving Indian Country protecting sovereignty, preserving culture, educating youth and building capacity. The Association was formed in 1922 to change the destructive path of federal policy from assimilation, termination and allotment, to sovereignty, self-determination and self-sufficiency. Throughout its 98-year history, the Association has provided national advocacy on watershed issues that support sovereignty and culture, while working at a grassroots level with Tribes to support the implementation of programs that affect real lives on the ground.

The Association opposes all stereotyped or derogatory use of language or images to describe Native Americans. The term "squaw" is a word that is a derogatory term for a woman and even describes the female sexual organ. This term has been removed from place names across the country - including in Phoenix, Arizona where the term for the place name for a popular recreational park was renamed to honor a Native American woman soldier who died in combat. The place is now called "Piestewa Peak". The Association - and universally across Indian Country - condones the use of this term as a place name. The word does not honor Native American women but degrades them. Simply, if we would not name the place "Vagina", then we should not name it "Squaw."

There are many ways to honor the original peoples of your area - and the primary method to do this is to collaborate with those Indigenous peoples. Philadelphia and the surrounding area are the homelands of the Osage and Shawnee Nations - who were removed from the area to Oklahoma. Reach out to those Native Nations and ask them how to best honor them in the place names of your communities.

Thank you for your time and attention. If you have any questions or concerns, please reach out to me at [shannon.aiaa@indian-affairs.org](mailto:shannon.aiaa@indian-affairs.org) or 240-314-7155.

*Yakoke* - my Choctaw thanks,

Shannon Keller O'Loughlin, Choctaw  
Executive Director & Attorney

### BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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**Marielba Alvarez**

Monday

To: [mandy.steele@yahoo.com](mailto:mandy.steele@yahoo.com) >

## From the National Museum of the American Indian

Dear Mandy,

Thank you again for reaching out to the National Museum of the American Indian. Even when we don't have a specific statement for the use of this word at the moment, please find below several resources that could be helpful.

The most recent statement of the museum's director Kevin Gover about the Washington NFL team addresses the use of Native Americans words.

The museum strongly believes that Native names, other words associated with Native people, and Native-inspired mascots do not honor Indigenous people, our histories, or our cultures. On the contrary: Any team name or image that evokes Native people emboldens disrespectful fans to continue to paint their faces, don headdresses, and act out faux-Native performances.

### **Ending the Use of Racist Mascots and Images**

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/blogs/national-museum-american-indian/2020/07/08/ending-racist-mascots-and-images/>

We also kindly suggest to reach out to the National Congress of American Indians. The National Congress of American Indians is an American Indian and Alaska Native rights organization. It is the oldest, largest, and most representative American Indian and Alaska Native organization serving the broad interests of tribal governments and communities. They provide many resources on issues related to Native Americans.

The other institution that we suggest is the Native American Journalists Association which has developed a series of guides to assist reporters and editors when covering Indian Country. Even when NAJA is dedicated to journalism, they do have resources and a research list on racist mascot that you can see here: <https://najanewsroom.com/end-racist-mascots/>

Here is another opinion article from the museum's director, back from 2011, but it is still very relevant. The following piece appeared in Indian Country Today in response to the May 4 U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs hearing on "Stolen Identities: The Impact of Racist Stereotypes on Indigenous People."

### **Native Mascots and other Misguided Beliefs**

<https://americanindian.si.edu/sites/1/files/pdf/seminars-symposia/Fall2011-Director.pdf>