

PIKE COUNTY COURIER

[Print Page](#)

Whose cemetery shall we reuse?

By David Hulse

Milford - There is no good reason for earth moving or archaeological digs around anyone's known burial sites, said Chuck DeMund. "It would be like us digging up a graveyard to see what's in it," said the tribal chief of the Eastern Lenape Nation.

The Lenape people are the Native Americans who inhabited the Delaware Valley before Europeans emigrated to North America.

The Pa. Museum and Historical Commission says there are three documented archaeological sites on the 118-acre Santos Farm in Milford, which the Delaware Valley school district is seeking to purchase. One of those sites contains graves.

Probably, quite a few graves, too, said Delaware Water Gap National Park Service archaeologist John Wright. "I've never been there, but from what I know of it the burial ground is extensive," said Wright.

"They're our ancestors," said DeMund.

"It's an intrusion," agreed Jim Beer a Lenape spokesman. "We want to see the past respected, the cultures, the indigenous history of Pennsylvania respected," he said.

Intrusions happen regularly. DeMund claimed that Wal-Mart has several times used earth grinding machines to destroy evidence of burials on contested sites in several Midwestern states.

Jimmie Strongheart Perri, a Native American who resides in New Jersey, recalled an incident some years ago at a state park in Lancaster County, where a mummified child's hand was unearthed during some park excavation work in a Susquehanna Indian burial ground. "They kept it in Milky Way candy box in the park ranger's office," he recalled.

When they learned of it, Perri and several other Native Americans went to the office and demanded the hand be surrendered. "We gave it a proper burial," he said.

"Certain people de-humanize others. They say, 'It's okay to dig. They're artifacts.' But we are human and that's disrespectful," Perri concluded.

DeMund and Beer both said it would be a good idea for them to sit down with the board of education and discuss what is involved.

But while tribal members and many other groups do recognize them as Lenape leaders, the board may not.

Dingman resident Virginia Kennedy has worked with the Lenape and is seeking a degree in Native American Studies. Kennedy said that the recent growth of Indian-owned, reservation gambling casinos has contributed to making the states reticent about recognizing tribal groups.

Beyond that, many tribes like the Lenape, who are also known as Delawares, have been splintered and displaced for hundreds of years. The only legally recognized Lenape Tribe resides in Oklahoma. "Someone could negotiate with recognized tribal leaders in another state who might not know or care about problems with a plan that local tribe members vehemently oppose," she said.

Beer concurred. "Pennsylvania does not recognize any indigenous peoples. They know us very well, but legally recognizing us is not on their priority list," Beer said.

DeMund said the Lenape have been arguing with state officials for recognition for the past 20 years.

State and federal historic preservation laws require organizations that receive their tax dollars to negotiate differences with Native Americans before disturbing burial grounds.

"We don't have the best of relationships with (state Museum and History Commission archaeologist) Steve McDougal, so when he speaks in terms as strong as he did, (Courier 1/26/07 "Fields Contain burial sites") that should have been a red flag, right there," DeMund said.

The other side, as school board members have said, is that should the property be privately purchased, no such negotiations are required and development would likely be much more intensive. Board members have predicted that the land would be claimed by strip malls and condominiums.

DeMund admitted the situation is a "Catch 22." While the school might be more responsive to cultural concerns, the higher land, away from the larger section of flood plain is the ground the district would want for a school.

That land is also the most likely spot for the burial sites, he said. "They usually buried them on a hill overlooking the village," DeMund said.

Given the alternatives, "The end result is a no-win situation for the Lenape people," he said.