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'Indian slayer' memorial sparks harsh feelings in 19th, 20th, 21st centuries

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By **AARON APPLGATE**
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In the middle of a quiet side street in Milford sits a plain oval foundation that until six years ago supported a public monument.

The monument had long been a tourist attraction in this historic town of 1,100 residents. It was erected in 1889 in memory of Tom Quick. He is said to have killed as many as 99 members of the Delaware tribe of American Indians — the Lenape — to avenge the death of his father at their hands. The obelisk was put up 93 or 94 years (the history is unclear) after Quick's death by a descendant and by people who believed he embodied the spirit of Manifest Destiny — their belief that Christian Anglo-Americans, empowered by divine providence, would control and populate the nation. They put it up despite strident opposition from those who called Quick nothing more than a despicable assassin.

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One hundred and fifteen years later, the debate is on again, brought back to life by incidents that began in 1997.

That year, right before Christmas, someone used a sledgehammer to smash the monument. Borough officials quickly took it down and, fearing more damage, took it to a secret location. Now it may be about to go back on its pedestal in the middle of the street. Just as in 1889, local leaders who want to put the monument back in place face opposition.

In 1999, two years after the monument was smashed, 200 people with American Indian roots and their supporters descended on Milford for a rally in front of the county courthouse.

"We are here to ask you to stop thinking of Tom Quick as a folk hero and see him for what he was: a murderous, hate-filled, racist killer," a speaker said.

The protest squelched any immediate plans Milford Borough Council may have had for restoring the monument.

Anti-monument letters from all over the country poured in and were collected in a cardboard box by Borough Council President Matthew Osterburg.

For the next few years, borough leaders met with local American Indian leaders, including Lenapes, to work out an agreement on the monument. It didn't happen. The parties were too far apart on the emotional issue.

In 2001, Milford's debate went national.

Noel Paul Stookey, Paul of the folk group Peter, Paul and Mary, recorded the song "Tom Quick" about the monument.

The song begins:

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Pike County's frame of mind



On Sept. 8, 2003, Milford Borough Council quietly and unanimously approved the re-erection of the Tom Quick Monument.

Lenape descendants are angry. They say the agreement was reached in secret and they were deliberately left out of the process because they are against the monument, which they view as racist.

"This is a monument to a mass murderer and a drunken fool who bragged about killing people," Chuck "Gentle Moon" Demund, a sub-chief of the Lenape Nation, said from his Gilbert home. Demund's group, like all Indian groups in Pennsylvania, is not recognized by the state. It is made up of 200 families who trace their roots to the Lenape. "It's an offensive monument. It shouldn't be used to perpetuate racism, and that's basically what it's doing."

Milford Borough Councilman William Kiger and other borough leaders teamed up with the Pike County Historical Society to restore the monument and to add an interpretive panel. They say that the 9-foot-tall zinc obelisk is part of the region's history and should stay up.

"It's simply part of the history of the time," said Kiger. "There are no negative thoughts about the Indian community."

Borough Council President Matthew Osterburg said he thought the debate had been resolved and felt the borough had listened to both sides.

"I thought we were past this," he said. "I really think if we were set on not talking to people, we would have put it up five years ago."

The monument is supposed to be resurrected this spring.

Consensus or conspiracy?

The finale of the negotiations came June 25, 2003, at a forum held at the Tom Quick Inn, a hotel and restaurant across the street from Pike County Courthouse.

The meeting was organized by Kiger and Lori Strelecki, curator of Pike County Historical Society's The Columns Museum. A six-person panel gave opinions on the monument.

There were no Lenape descendants on the panel. There were two American Indian descendants from Greentown who called themselves Chief Wounded Bear and Professor Frank Little Bear.

The two men, who are father and son, trace their roots to the Cree Indian Nation, a tribe from Quebec, Canada.

At the meeting, Wounded Bear and Little Bear, who would later support the monument effort, spoke. Little Bear was quoted in a local newspaper as saying it's important to tell both sides of the story, American Indian and white.

Their presence as representative American Indians reluctant to criticize the monument angers opponents.

"The general feeling was that it was a staged meeting," said Norman Gasparro, former president of the Tri-State Unity Coalition, a local diversity and anti-hate group that unsuccessfully sought to play a role in resolving the monument issue. "Kiger went around and got people who he felt supported the monument. Kiger has been searching for years to find Indians who would agree with him, and he finally found some."

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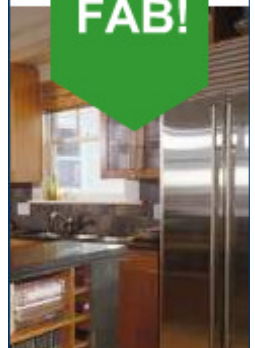
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Kiger and Strelecki said they couldn't find any Lenape to be on the panel.

"There were none to be found or who had an interest," Strelecki said.

"They chose not to come," Kiger said. "It was widely publicized."

But some Lenape leaders say this isn't true.

"He knows who to call, but he doesn't want to deal with us because he knows we're against it," said Demund.

Demund and Kiger are not strangers. But they aren't friends, either. Two years earlier, both were at an informal meeting organized by Kiger in White Haven. Kiger had called that meeting to meet with American Indians about resolving the dispute over the monument.

"We basically told him (Kiger) to put the monument in a museum," said Demund of the 2001 meeting. "We all agreed that putting it back up was a bad idea. I thought we got through to him."

Demund, who was not invited to the June 25, 2003, forum, said he never heard from Kiger again.

The only Lenape invited to the forum was Bart "Standing Elk" Cartwright of Bucks County. Cartwright couldn't make the meeting because of his job, but said he told Kiger that the monument should not be put back up.

"I told him (Kiger) it should be put in a museum," Cartwright said. "I don't think they should put it back up. It's just not right."

Wounded Bear, like Kiger, defended the selection of forum participants, stressing that the meeting was open to public and heavily advertised through newspapers.

"That meeting was publicized," he said. "The fact was they didn't take it seriously enough to come. I was disappointed that some people weren't there, and I thought it was very disrespectful not to show up."

After the forum, which organizers hailed as a positive step forward in resolving the impasse, Kiger and Wounded Bear privately came up with the final solution that would be approved by borough council at their Sept. 8 meeting.

The two men wrote the words for a new tablet that has already been installed on the monument base. It says:

This is a gravesite and should be respected as such.

This monument and its inscriptions reflect a dialog and mindset of the era in which it was first erected circa 1889, which was 94 years after the death of Tom Quick.

Many stories have been written about Tom Quick but there is not enough documented evidence to separate truth from fiction. However, research into his life continues to be encouraged by the Pike County Historical Society.

This gravesite is under the care of the Milford Borough Council with the approbation of members of the Cree Nation, long recognized as peacemakers.

Two things about the new tablet anger opponents of the monument: the involvement of members from the Cree Nation and the emphasis on the monument as a gravesite.

"This is a Lenape issue," said Demund, who deliberately refrained from criticizing Wounded Bear and Little Bear. "It doesn't say he (Quick) was the great Cree slayer. It says he was the Delaware slayer."

"The Cree don't have the right to come down and back this monument," said Perry Gower, president of the Tri-State Unity Coalition. "It's just not their territory."

Strelecki defended her and Kiger's decision to invite Wounded Bear and Little Bear into the discussion.

"They were willing to come and discuss the issues," she said. "They presented themselves to us as peacemakers of Indian society. They assured us they were good representatives, and they were."

Kiger also defended his decision to bring in Wounded Bear and Little Bear by contrasting them with members of the Lenape Nation with whom he had dealt.

"Even though they are well-meaning, they are taking an extreme position. They stir up people who live in the discrimination of the past. Most people are trying to move beyond that with good will and work together, and Wounded Bear and Little Bear are certainly in that spirit."

Wounded Bear defended the monument largely because the remains of Tom Quick are buried under it.

"Our rule is to respect the spirit and the grave," he said. "If the history (on the monument) isn't correct, well, that's too bad, it's a gravesite. That's the way any traditional Indian would look at it. Respect for the dead. That's the Indian way. Anyone who doesn't practice this is not practicing his spirituality."

The Lenape don't see the gravesite issue in the same way as Wounded Bear.

"I can think of a much better tombstone," Demund said. "Besides, it was not dedicated as a gravesite. It was dedicated as a monument."

Quick's actual grave was dug up in 1889 and his remains were removed so they could be reburied under the monument, along with a lot of what today would be called time-capsule material.

Question of interpretation?

At the debate rages, both sides are interpreting history to bolster their own point of view.

Supporters of the monument generally downplay Quick's supposed murderous exploits.

"It was a story that got embellished," said Strelecki, who speculated that the monument was a gimmick for publicity.

Wounded Bear said there is no evidence Quick killed anybody.

"There isn't any proof," he said. "Nobody ever found any dead Indians."

Pike County historian George Fluhr concluded, "There is almost nothing about him based on solid historical information."

Critics of the monument generally enhance the violence enshrined in the Quick legends to make their point.

A Lenape Nation-affiliated Web site (<http://www.lenapevoices.org>) includes a quote attributed to Tom Quick from a particularly bloody story in which Quick kills an Indian baby after murdering its parents. When asked why he killed the baby, Quick supposedly said, "Nits make lice."

The argument now resembles a good old-fashioned power struggle.

Monument proponents are determined not to give in to the Lenape and activists who they say want to change history. Supporters say the monument, and the Tom Quick legends, are part of history.

"They just want to erase history and have it their way," Kiger said of his critics. "It's simply part of the history of the time. It's a nice part of our history. It was a fun legend. As a kid, he was a colorful figure."

"You can't just change history to make it politically correct for these times. It's what it is. It's history," Strelecki said.

Lenape descendants see things differently.

"I agree that you can't change history," said Jim Beer, a spokesperson for Lenape Nation. "But they're talking about honoring it in the same way as it was done. That's like saying there is no need to change with the times. That argument is set up as a blocker. No, we can't change history, but we sure don't need to honor it if it's not in the best interest of the greater community."

Is it over?

Since the Sept. 8, 2003, vote to re-erect the monument, Lenape members have organized a newspaper letters-to-the-editor campaign.

Wounded Bear said he is reopening the issue with an Indian Council.

Lenape Chuck Demund said he wants to meet with borough council.

And while Borough councilman Kiger is satisfied with the voted-on solution, Borough Council President Osterburg is frustrated that after six years of talks, the issue is still divisive.

"I thought what we did was right. If we offended people, I'm sorry," he said.

Osterburg added, "The last thing I want to do is put it up and have it destroyed again."

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