

# Fulfilling a Prophecy

## THE PAST AND PRESENT OF THE LENAPE IN PENNSYLVANIA

BY ABIGAIL SELDIN,  
ROBERT RED  
HAWK RUTH, AND  
SHELLEY DEPAUL

ONCE THE UNDISPUTED lords of southeastern Pennsylvania, the Lenape Indians disappear from the state's history after their forcible removal westward in the 1700s. Although the federal, state, and academic authorities have maintained that no Lenape remained in Pennsylvania at the close of the 18th century, this position is belied by the existence

of direct descendants of Lenape people who chose to stay in Pennsylvania. Though some of these Lenape people intermarried with European settlers, members of this lineage have faithfully upheld their Native traditions for more than two hundred years. Fearing the persecutions suffered by their contemporaries in the American Indian community, these Lenape have kept their ancestry a well-guarded secret. The extraordinary stories of these families will be revealed for the first time on September 13, 2008, in the Penn Museum's new exhibition in the Jacqueline W. and John C. Hover II Gallery, *Fulfilling a Prophecy: The Past and Present of the Lenape in Pennsylvania*.

The genesis of the exhibit was a project undertaken by Abigail Seldin in 2006–2007 as part of the Penn Museum's Research Experience for Undergraduates program "Native Voices" (see *Expedition* 49(3):30-35). The exhibit's earliest plans called for a

broad treatment of the trek of the Lenape people from Pennsylvania to their current locations in Canada, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Kansas, and Oklahoma. The focus of the project changed dramatically, however, when Seldin joined Robert W. Preucel, the Gregory Annenberg Weingarten Curator of North America, Lucy Fowler Williams, the Jeremy A. Sabloff Keeper, and William Wierzbowski, the Associate Keeper, of the Museum's American Section, to bring a traditional Lenape paddle to a Maple Ceremony being held in the Pocono Mountains by the Lenape Nation of Pennsylvania—a community formed by Lenape descendants who remained in Pennsylvania.

At the Maple Ceremony, members of the Lenape Nation began to tell Seldin their history. Though the stories of the Lenape people who left Pennsylvania in the 18th century are of



Members of the Lenape Nation of Pennsylvania and representatives of the Museum's American Section stand together for a group photo after concluding the Maple Ceremony in February 2007.

Lucy Fowler Williams



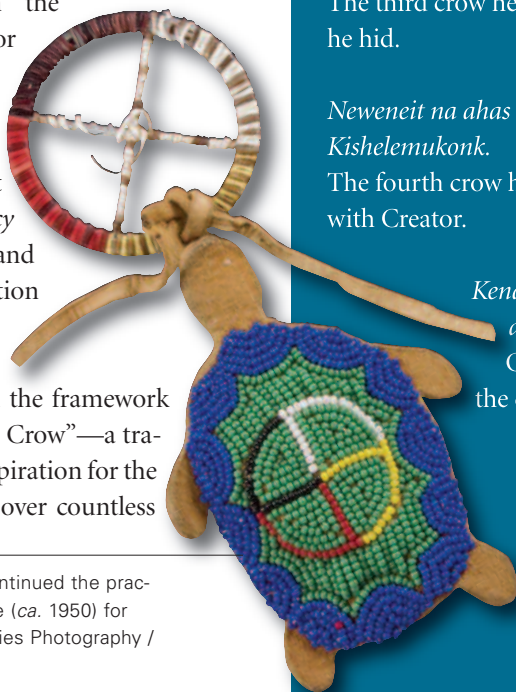
The Co-Curators Shelley DePaul, Chief Robert Red Hawk Ruth, and Abigail Seldin sit together on one of the boundary stones of the Walking Purchase of 1737. Copyright © 2008 Wayne Kachelries Photography / www.WayneKphoto.com.

undeniable importance, it soon became apparent that the community here in Pennsylvania had an interest in working with the Museum to tell their own extraordinary story.

Several weeks later, Seldin met with the Tribal Council, which gave its blessing to the exhibition. Chief Robert Red Hawk Ruth and Shelley DePaul, then Tribal Secretary, joined Seldin as Co-Curators of the exhibit, and other Lenape elders agreed to serve in an advisory capacity. Explaining the significance of working on this exhibit, Chief Ruth declared “all my life, museums have been telling me that I am from a Stone Age culture. Working with the Museum at Penn is an opportunity for us to teach people more about our history and our culture.”

As one would expect from a truly collaborative exhibition, the content and design of *Fulfilling a Prophecy* respects and integrates both Native and Museum approaches to the organization and communication of knowledge.

In March 2007, the team decided to tell the history of the Lenape through the framework offered by the “Prophecy of the Fourth Crow”—a traditional story of the Lenape and the inspiration for the title of the exhibition. Handed down over countless



Many Lenape families in Pennsylvania have continued the practice of making umbilical cord bags like this one (ca. 1950) for their infants. Copyright © 2008 Wayne Kachelries Photography / www.WayneKphoto.com.

## NEWENEIT NA AHAS

### “The Prophecy of the Fourth Crow”

As told by Chief Robert Red Hawk Ruth  
and translated by Shelley DePaul

*Lomewe, luwe na okwes xu laxakwihele xkwithakamika.*  
Long ago it was said a fox it will be loosened on  
the earth.

*Ok nen luwe newa ahasak xu peyok.*  
Also it was said four crows they will come.

*Netamixink na ahas kenthu li guttitehwagan wichi  
Kishelemukonk.*  
The first crow he flew the way of harmony with  
Creator.

*Nisheneit na ahas kwechi pilito entalelemukonk, shek  
palsu ok ankela.*  
The second crow he tried to clean it the world, but he  
became sick and he died.

*Nexeneit na ahas weneyoo ankelek xansa ok  
koshihuwe.*  
The third crow he saw him dead his brother and  
he hid.

*Neweneit na ahas kenthu li guttetehwagan lapi wichi  
Kishelemukonk.*  
The fourth crow he flew the way of harmony again  
with Creator.

*Kenahkihechik xu withatuwak xkwith-  
akamika.*  
Caretakers they will live together on  
the earth.



The annual Meesing Ceremony requires a Lenape man to dance with a Meesing mask, like this one (ca. 1800) which has been used and passed down in Chief Ruth's family for over 200 years.

generations, the story speaks of time passing through the flights of four different crows. Chief Ruth summarizes the current interpretation of the Prophecy in the following way: "We now know that the First Crow was the Lenape before the coming of the Europeans. The Second Crow symbolized the death and destruction of our culture. The Third Crow was

our people going underground and hiding. The Fourth Crow was the Lenape becoming caretakers again and working with everybody to restore this land."

Plans for the exhibition include a number of creative compromises beyond employing the "Prophecy of the Fourth Crow." The exhibit emphasizes issues of identity and cultural *survivance* (Gerald Vizenor's term for survival + resistance), and addresses those issues with information drawn from Lenape oral histories, the traditional knowledge of their elders, as well as the more typical anthropological and historical texts. To illustrate this narrative, *Fulfilling a Prophecy* will feature objects lent by Lenape individuals and a number pieces from the Museum's own collections.

For the people of the Pennsylvania area, the exhibit provides an exciting reintroduction to their Lenape neighbors and an opportunity to learn about a missing chapter in Pennsylvania history. The focus on the Lenape history in Pennsylvania together with the full integration of Chief Ruth and DePaul into the curatorial process makes *Fulfilling a Prophecy* a story of presence, rather than absence.

DePaul points to the importance of this, noting "we are still here, carrying on the traditions of our ancestors in a way that not only preserves our history, but also makes sense and restores balance in our world today. We are, indeed, 'Living Lenape' and not just a part of history." She clearly articulates the empowering effects the exhibit will have on Lenape youth, stating, "it will be very thrilling indeed, for all of our children, to see our own culture and history unfold through the stories and artifacts of our people and to see them displayed alongside many of the other great cultures of the world." 🏠

*The Co-Curators of Fulfilling a Prophecy: The Past and Present of the Lenape in Pennsylvania* are ABIGAIL SELDIN, a sub-matriculant B.A.-M.S. student in Penn's Department of Anthropology, ROBERT RED HAWK RUTH, the current chief of the Lenape Nation of Pennsylvania, and SHELLEY DEPAUL, formerly the Tribal Secretary and now the Lenape Nation's Language Coordinator.

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Abigail Seldin