

A historical photograph of an early Seminole camp. Several people, including men, women, and children, are dressed in traditional, colorful, patterned clothing. They are standing and sitting in a clearing with thatched-roof huts and palm trees in the background.

Big win in #NoMoreStolenAncestors fight

The Seminole Tribe led the charge in a push for Smithsonian policy changes that will result in unprecedented repatriation

SANDRA HALE SCHULMAN • DEC 7, 2020

Early Seminole camp (Photo courtesy of the Seminole Tribe)

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Special to [*Indian Country Today*](#)

Recent policy changes at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., will provide an unprecedented opportunity to repatriate thousands of ancestors and sacred funerary objects to the Seminole and other tribes across the U.S.

The Repatriation Committee of the Seminole Tribe of Florida led the push for the revisions, which included years of emotional meetings.

“The eventual enactment of this policy is a historic victory for Indigenous rights and an encouraging sign that the NMNH recognizes the importance of returning ancestors to finally rest,” said Paul Backhouse, historic preservation officer for the Seminole Tribe.

Over the decades, the Smithsonian has obtained tens of thousands of human remains and archaeological artifacts through donations and acquisitions. They include the bones of nearly 1,500 Seminole ancestors exhumed from dozens of burial sites across Florida.

In some cases, the remains were mislabeled or found to be “culturally unidentifiable,” meaning archeologists didn’t know which tribe they were from.

In 2018, the Seminole Tribe’s Historic Preservation Office passed a resolution through the United South and Eastern Tribes encouraging the museum to give equal weight to tribal knowledge and oral histories in the identification process, and to create a system that would allow all ancestors to be repatriated. It passed a similar resolution in 2019 with the National Congress of American Indians.

The office also created an online group, #NoMoreStolenAncestors, on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to help the public follow the journey.

The museum’s new policy includes provisions to repatriate remains and associated funerary objects even if archeologists didn’t say which specific tribe they came from.

Additionally, tens of thousands of archaeological artifacts — pots, arrowheads, carved bone tools and wooden effigies — are now classified as funerary objects, making them subject to repatriation.

“The NMNH holds vast collections of human remains that have been refused repatriation for nearly 30 years,” said Domonique deBeaubien, collections manager and chair of the Seminole Tribe’s Repatriation Committee. “Until now, there has been no legal mechanism to return those ancestors to their homelands. That transition can now begin.”

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While the new policy is a big step, there is still much work to do, said Tina Osceola, Seminole, an associate tribal court justice and Repatriation Committee member. Osceola and other tribal citizens have made repeated lobbying trips to Washington, D.C., and to Tallahassee.

“As our tribe continues to seek the return of our stolen ancestors, we will continue to work on behalf of Indian Country to pass better laws that can help to return more ancestors, funerary and sacred objects,” she said. “I hope that the nation and world will shift their beliefs that our culture and people are only valuable when owned, displayed or studied.”

The policy changes also open the door to the Seminole Tribe’s Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum once again becoming a Smithsonian Institution Affiliate, a position it withdrew from over the repatriation issue. The museum is in the midst of a multimillion-dollar expansion, with a groundbreaking set for 2023 that will enlarge its exhibition galleries and lobby area.

The National Museum of the American Indian Act provides the basis for which human remains and funerary objects are eligible to be repatriated to culturally affiliated tribal members and Native Hawaiian organizations.

The Repatriation Office at the National Museum of Natural History will continue to respond to requests for the repatriation of remains and objects.

To date, it has made available for repatriation the remains of more than 6,000 individuals, along with 200,000 funerary objects and 55 sacred objects or objects of cultural patrimony.

“We look forward to working with Native communities on requests for culturally unaffiliated remains and associated funerary objects,” wrote Bill Billeck, NMNH Repatriation Office program manager, in a message that accompanied the revised policy.

Summaries of National Museum of Natural History repatriation reports can be found on [the museum's website](#). Inventories and copies of the repatriation reports are available to tribes upon request.

Sandra Hale Schulman, Cherokee, has been writing about Native issues since 1994. She is an author of four books, has contributed to shows at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian and has produced three films on Native musicians.

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