

A photograph of the Seminole Museum building, a large structure with a prominent green metal roof and a large glass facade. The building is set against a clear sky with some palm trees visible in the background.

Seminole Museum to Smithsonian: 'No More Stolen Ancestors'

Major expansion dispute over the repatriation of ancestral remains causes Seminole Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum to withdraw from the Smithsonian

SANDRA HALE SCHULMAN • MAR 31, 2020

The Seminole Tribe of Florida's Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum is reopening Feb. 14, 2022, after being closed most of the past year because of the COVID-19 pandemic. (Photo courtesy of the Seminole Tribe of Florida)

At the annual Seminole Pow wow and Fair held at the Hard Rock Resort in Hollywood, Florida, there was an unusual banner standing at the entrance next to the souvenir t-shirts and wildly colorful vendor booths.

A banner with large yellow capitalized words in a social media hashtag format, #NoMoreStolenAncestors.

The banner further stated that the Seminole Tribe of Florida and their Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum — who are fighting with the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History for the repatriation of remains of about 1,500 individuals and tens of thousands of artifacts — has withdrawn from being a Smithsonian Institution Affiliate at the end of January.

The battle isn't new; as the Seminole Tribal Historic Preservation Office has been trying to get the items back for more than eight years.

"It's a shocking situation," said Paul Backhouse, Tribal Historic Preservation officer and director of the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum. "They don't want to give them back; they want to tell the Tribe's story."

"In essence, they are holding our ancestors' hostage," said Tina Osceola, who was formerly a director of the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum, board member of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian and is currently Seminole Tribal Court associate judge. "They are not allowed to have a final resting place. My activities today will affect someone's grandmother who may be sitting in a box at the Smithsonian. What is the scientific value in that?"

"This area started as a tourist camp in the early 20th century," says Carrie Dilley, Visitor Services and Development Manager for the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum. "Nestled in the heart of the Everglades on the Big Cypress Seminole Indian Reservation, the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum is home to more than 180,000 unique artifacts and archival items. In the Seminole language, Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki means a place to learn, a place to remember. The Museum showcases the Seminole Tribe's rich cultural and historical ties to the Southeast and Florida, as they have made Big Cypress their home since creation. "

"Thanks to our Seminole Indian Library and Archives, displays, films, and dioramas, we were designated a Smithsonian Institution Affiliate and have accreditation from the American Association of Museums in 2005 which is a big deal to us as they have very stringent requirements."

But that coveted association, shared by several of the bigger museums in South Florida, has ended. The museum is in the midst of a multi-million dollar expansion, with a groundbreaking set for 2023 that will enlarge the small museum's exhibition galleries and lobby area.

William Billeck, the National Museum of Natural History repatriation office program manager, wrote in an email, "The National Museum of Natural History strongly supports the repatriation of culturally affiliated Native American human remains. We will continue to work with the Seminole Tribe to acquire further information on all human remains in museum collections that are being evaluated for possible cultural affiliation. In addition, our present policy on retaining Native American human remains that cannot be culturally affiliated after a thorough assessment of the evidence is under review within the Anthropology Department."

That review is expected to be completed in April.

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The basis of the dispute is that the National Museum of Natural History says the items, which range from thousands of years old to the 20th century, are culturally not identifiable. Since there is no written record of the tribe's existence from that long ago, the Smithsonian claims there is not enough evidence to say they belong to the Seminole Tribe.

Back in October 2018, the United South and Eastern Tribe passed a resolution that called for the National Museum of Natural History to revise its policies on repatriation so they would include provisions for the repatriation of culturally unidentifiable human remains. Included in the resolution was addressing the specific issue the Seminoles have encountered including its “relationship to the ancestral, historic or aboriginal territories from where the human remains were collected.”

The Smithsonian claims the state was completely devoid of all Indigenous people in Florida during the eras the artifacts are from at the meeting in March last year. They base these claims on the work of anthropologist [William Sturtevant](#) who conducted field work for 18 months in Florida in the 1960s, and became the Smithsonian’s authority on the Tribe, writing the Smithsonian’s Handbook of North American Indians.

The National Museum of Natural History says the items, which range from thousands of years old to the 20th century, are culturally unidentifiable. Since there is no written record of the Tribe’s existence from that time, the Smithsonian claims there is not enough evidence to say they belong to the Seminole Tribe or to any tribe.

“They stuck a note in their file about our concerns,” Osceola says. “We are not allowed to participate in their studies, and their report can sometimes take years, then are very difficult to get changed. A tentative deadline in April may address some of this.”

The Smithsonian uses published academic reports to verify claims and does not give the same consideration to oral histories. According to Osceola, at the meeting the remains were called a “collection” and “specimens.”

“They view the Tribe’s movement into Florida as a singular event with Creek peoples descending into an empty state over a short period of time, rather than a process that started thousands of years ago when Creek descendants mixed with existing indigenous people to form what is now the Seminole Tribe of Florida,” Tribal Historic Preservation Offices collections manager Domonique deBeaubien wrote in a statement to the Seminole Tribune. “By viewing the Seminoles as completely separate from their Indigenous ancestors, the Tribe legally has no claim to them under current Smithsonian policy.”

“This disallows a claim by anyone,” Osceola said. “They define us all as Creek even though not all of us are.”

At the meeting, Tribal Historic Preservation Officers brought the National Museum of Natural History ten years of thousands of shovel tests taken on Seminole land to prove the continuous occupation of the Tribe’s ancestral lands. Shovel tests are used to determine if there are cultural remains under the surface.

“We came to them from a level playing field, with the same scientific information, but they wouldn’t even look at it,” Osceola said. “They said they spoke to Florida archeologists and made their determination. We invited them but they never came down to research with us.”

“The Council is behind us,” Osceola said.

“This will affect all of Indian Country on the issue of repatriation,” said Osceola.

“We will move forward on this with an aggressive strategy since our ancestors are not held in respect and allowed to rest.”

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.