Mohicans reclaim a key part of their New York ancestral lands

By Kenneth C. Crowe II

EAST GREENBUSH – The Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of the Mohican Indians has regained ownership of a culturally significant 156 acres along the Hudson River that was deeded to a Dutch colonist 386 years ago.

The Open Space Institute donated the Papscanee Island Nature Preserve to the Mohicans reestablishing the Native American nation’s presence on a historically important location in its ancestral homeland. The Mohicans are based in Wisconsin after being forced westward by European settlers.

“This is a significant part of our homeland. To be able to say it’s ours again is very cool,” said Heather Bruegl, cultural affairs director for the Stockbridge-Munsee Community.

Papscanee Island is named for Papsickene, a Mohican sachem, who led the village at the site. His heirs signed a deed to the property turning it over to Kiliaen Van Rensselaer, a Dutch diamond merchant and member of the Dutch West India Company, on April 13, 1637.

As part of the announcement of the land’s return, the Mohicans and Open Space Institute issued a story map entitled "The Long Journey Home: The Return of New
York’s Papscanee Island to the Stockbridge-Munsee Community."

“The return of Papscanee Island Preserve is an acknowledgement of the Stockbridge-Munsee Community’s historic connection to this property, and of the bitter history of land dispossession and land policies that not only removed Mohican ancestors from this homeland but also brutalized and segregated generations of those who originally inhabited our nation,” said Kim Elliman, president and CEO of the Open Space Institute.

The Mohicans take their name from their word for the Hudson River, the Mahbicannituck, which means the “river that flows both ways” or the “waters that are never still.”

“The Mohican Nation thanks Open Space Institute for this exciting opportunity to reestablish a connection to an important cultural site in its ancestral territory,” said Shannon Holsey, the Stockbridge-Munsee Community president.

The Mohicans have been active in their ancestral homeland along the Hudson River in New York State east into Massachusetts protecting culturally important sites and explaining their history and connection to the region.

The Mohicans have identified the location through tribal tradition and archaeological investigation as being a village site for thousands of years. Indigenous people took advantage of the rich waters of the Hudson River and the prime farmland on it during the residency.

“It was the third sale of land by Mohican people to the Dutch; payment was made in the form of duffels, axes, knives, and wampum. The land was immediately settled and farmed by Dutch tenants and has been in continuous cultivation ever since,” the Mohicans and the Open Space Institute said in announcing the transfer of the property.

“To have a place where he (Papsickene) lived; to have it back in our ownership is very significant,” Bruegl said.

The Open Space Institute acquired Papscanee Island in the early 1990s to protect the culturally and environmentally critical lands from development from the nearby Port of Rensselaer to the north. The nature preserve is in East Greenbush, Rensselaer and Schodack off Route 9J and its hiking trails are administered by Rensselaer County.

Ashley McLaughlin and her husband Jimmy McLaughlin were hiking the three miles of trails in the preserve Friday afternoon, taking advantage of the warm, sunny spring weather after days of rain.

“It’s great. It’s about time,” Ashley McLaughlin said about the return of the land to the Mohicans.

The Papscanee Island Nature Preserve will continue to be managed by Rensselaer County and the Rensselaer Land Trust for public access and protection. Bruegl said the site will be used for cultural events in the future now that the Mohicans again own it.