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Testimony of Representative Donald Soctomah

January 28, 2000

LD 2418 "An Act Concerning Offensive Names"

Judiciary Committee – Chairs Senator Longley and Representative Thompson.
Today is an important day in Maine Native history. We are stepping forward to address a term, which has been used for many years to degrade and dehumanize native women. This was the motivating factor behind the legislation, which would remove the word squaw from place names within the State of Maine. This is not an issue about political correctness; it is about basic human decency and respect for one's fellow citizens. It is not a linguist's definition of the original Native word that is of concern; it is the way the term has been used to define Native women in its current context. Through communication and education we can rid this State of offensive, derogatory words, so that Native women will have the right to define themselves. This Bill seeks to protect an underrepresented group within this State, Native Women. They are entitled to protection against basic human rights violations, such as the use of demoralizing language. The driving force behind this Bill is the hundreds of Native Women, who are continually offended by the use of this slang word. To the general public, after generations of exposure, the word squaw is seen as a neutral word, but to the Native Women this word continues to be a slanderous attack against them and their culture. In racial incidents involving hate and physical violence this continually used the word to attack Native people. These incidents occur more often near the Native communities, where unfortunately the clash of the cultures still exists.

We need to grow and understand that the use of the term squaw shows a lack of compassion for human beings. It is hard for the general population to imagine how hurtful a word can be unless it is directed at them, their culture, or their racial background.

In other areas where the squaw word is used to define geographic features, we can enhance the history of the area by using the correct terms. For example, Squaw Mountain can be called Maquaso Mountain in honor of Chief Kineo's mother to whom the legend refers to. Another place, called Squaw Bosom, makes a connotation towards Native women. We have a chance to change that sexual connotation and to give the respect to Native women that they deserve.

Being a Native man, and the father of seven daughters, I do not want to see them, or anyone else's daughter, have to carry these verbal scars for the rest of their lives.

This Bill will send, with great effectiveness, a goodwill message of understanding to the Native people of this State: That Maine will stop sanctioning the use of offensive words that dehumanize and exploit the Native people. The Native communities of the Passamaquoddy, Penobscot, Maliseet and MicMac, including elected governmental officials of these Tribes, representing 7,500 people, have signed a resolution declaring the Year 2000 as the year of the Native woman. We ask the State of Maine and the Federal government to recognize this declaration by stopping the use of the term squaw.

Today you will hear testimony on how the S...word is being used against Native women. You need to listen because the vast general population does not get to hear this, now is the time for this to be told.

I ask for passage of this Bill to end the perpetuation of dehumanizing language that has been used to define Native women. It is never an aggressive act for a people to exercise their right to self-determination. It is an intrinsic right that is woven into the fiber of values that this country was founded upon.

January 27, 2000

Re: Written Testimony in support of L.D. #2418
"An Act Concerning Offensive Names"

Just because a word has been used and spoken for many years does not make it acceptable. Becoming knowledgeable of the origin and the meaning of the word "Squaw", along with knowing how offensive this word is to Native Americans should be reason enough for all to make an effort to no longer use this word.

Hopefully, all this information and "knowing" will encourage the next step, which is the desire to remove the work "Squaw" from all areas of our lives.

Using the word "Squaw" is comparable to calling a mountain "Vagina Mountain." Now I wonder who would want to do that??



Betsy A. Tannian
Penobscot Nation

2418

**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF L.D. 1418
BY RENE ATTEAN, COORDINATOR OF I.R.A.T.E**

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I would like to thank-you for the opportunity to present this testimony.

There has been a long held belief in this country that Native People are lesser than and unequal to the majority white culture. These beliefs have led white people to freely use derogatory words and gestures when describing Native People and one of the most common words used to describe Native Women is squaw.

As a young girl growing up on the reservation, I was often called a "dirty squaw" which would reduce me to tears of pain and anger. As I grew older, I came to realize that many of the town boys thought squaw was synonymous with sex. I came to hate the word squaw and the people who used it.

Now we are here at the dawn of a new millenium and the White culture is still using the word squaw and telling us that Squaw Mountain is intended as an honor and respect. Please don't expect me to be grateful for your honor and respect.

I have read in the newspapers that Governor King wants historical background on the naming of Squaw Mountain. How racist is it to question a Nation's right to define its own reality? How much longer do you expect us to sit back and turn the other cheek to institutionalized prejudice, bigotry and racism? When will you treat us with true respect? When will you have the courage to face your internalized racism?

We are very often spoken about but given very little opportunity to speak for ourselves. Now you must listen to my words The most common word used to describe Native Women is squaw. The word squaw is a derogatory word. Do not allow racism and prejudice guide the government in Maine. I have addressed all of you with respect here.

Can you do less for me?

**Testimony in Support
of LD 2418
An Act Concerning Offensive Names
Presented by Evan Richert
On Behalf of the Maine Indian Tribal State Commission**

January 28, 2000

Introduction

Good morning, Senator Longley, Representative Thompson and other members of the Committee on Judiciary, my name is Evan Richert. As a member of the Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission (MITSC), I am here today to testify in support of LD 2418. MITSC's Chair, Cushman Anthony, is out of state until next week, and asked me to present this statement in his absence.

Passamaquoddy Tribal Representative Donald Soctomah introduced LD 2418 on behalf of MITSC to prohibit the use of the word in place names in Maine. I would like to bring to your attention summary of issues and views about defining squaw as an offensive place name that has been prepared by the Commission. As you will see in reviewing this, MITSC has found that the word squaw is highly offensive to many Wabanaki and other people in Maine, as well as to people beyond Maine.

What the Bill Does

An existing law (1 MRSA, Chapter 27), sponsored in 1976 by then-Representative Gerald Talbot of Portland, already removes offensive names from places in Maine. This law states that an offensive name is a name of a place which includes the designation "nigger" as a separate word or as part of a word and prohibits its use as a place name. LD 2418 amends this law by adding squaw as an offensive name and prohibiting its use. Under both the current law and the bill, there is no legal obligation for a business to change its name. However, geographic features; streets, alleys or other roads; and political subdivisions may not include the designation "nigger" (current law) or squaw (proposed in LD 2418), and these names must be changed by reasonable actions of the municipal officers of a municipality or the county commissioners responsible for unorganized territory. Any person who believes that a place has an offensive name may file a complaint with the Maine Human Rights Commission.

Places Affected

In Maine, there are twenty-five known geographic features in seven counties with the word "squaw" or "squa." Twelve of these features are in Piscataquis County and six are in Aroostook County. Features with this name also are located in the following counties: Cumberland (1), Franklin (1), Penobscot (1), Waldo (2), and Washington (2).

Seven of the features in Piscataquis County and three of the features in Aroostook County are located totally or partially in Maine Public Reserve Land. Two of the features are in Indian Territory located in Franklin and Penobscot Counties.

It is not known how many streets, alleys, and roads include the word squaw. MITSC has asked the U.S. Postal Service for a printout of the streets in Maine that include this name. We will make this information available when we receive it.

Legislative History

In 1976, during the floor debate on Representative Talbot's bill, several legislators noted that the word "squaw" was offensive to Native people. The issue surfaced again at the Legislature three years ago.

In early 1997, then-Passamaquoddy Tribal Representative Fred Moore introduced LD 955 to the First Regular Session of the 118th Maine Legislature. The bill authorized the Passamaquoddy Joint Tribal Council to change the names of geographic features within their Indian Territory from offensive names to appropriate prediscovery names. MITSC supported the bill, but it did not pass the Judiciary Committee. Instead, as a result of the review of a package of bills, the Legislature passed a Resolve that required MITSC to undertake a systematic review of the civil laws of Maine over a period of four years. The resolve required MITSC to review the concerns of the Passamaquoddy Tribe which led to them to introduce their package of legislation during the First Regular Session.

In 1998, as MITSC began its review of the civil laws, there was quick agreement that changing geographic names in Passamaquoddy Territory should happen and should not require extensive discussion. Thus, LD 1953 was the first recommendation for legislation to emerge from MITSC's review of civil laws. The bill, which became Public Law 1997, Chapter 650, recognized the right of the Passamaquoddy Tribe to change the names of geographic features within its Indian Territory. Further, there was an understanding that MITSC would continue to review the issue of place names in Maine.

In 1999, at the urging of members of the American Indian Movement, Governor King asked MITSC to examine the claim that the word "squaw" is offensive. To do so, we turned first to the tribes here in Maine to learn of their personal feelings and experiences -- which confirmed the offensive nature of the word -- and second to recognized meanings of the word generally. With the help of our executive director, here is what we've found.

Dictionary Definitions of Squaw

The first meaning of squaw listed in the 1993 edition of the Oxford English Dictionary is "a North American Indian woman, esp. a married one...Now frequently considered *offensive*." Another meaning listed by this dictionary is "an effeminate or weak man." The earliest cited English use of the word is in the year 1634.

Three different editions of Webster's and Merriam-Webster's dictionaries, published from 1983 until 1999, recognize that the term has become more offensive over time:

* In 1983, the first definition of "squaw" is "an American Indian woman or wife," and the second is "any woman: chiefly humorous."

* In 1993, the first definition is "an American Indian woman" and the second is "woman, wife--usually used disparagingly."

* In 1999, the first definition is "often offensive: an American Indian woman" and the second is "usually disparaging: woman, wife."

At least two other dictionaries--the American Heritage Dictionary and the Cambridge Dictionary of American English--also identify "squaw" as offensive.

Roots of Squaw

The Oxford English Dictionary refers to Narragansett Indian squaws, Massachusetts sqa, with related forms in many other Algonquin dialects; the earliest cited English use of the term is in 1634. Merriam Webster dictionaries also refer to "Massachuset" sqa, ussqua and the year 1634. One of the editions of Webster's refers to Massachusetts Indian sqa, wshqua; Narragansett squ[^a]ws; and similar roots. Most academicians agree with this description of the roots of the word and agree that the native word meant woman or wife or female, with no negative connotation.

There is more debate about the Mohawk word "otsikwaw." Some believe it meant female genitalia. Some believe that this is inaccurate etymology.

What Squaw Means Today

Consistent with the dictionary definitions of "squaw," there is a high degree of agreement (though not 100%) that the word has a derogatory meaning today. Most Native people believe that "squaw" has a disparaging meaning, and many view it as a fighting word that delivers the message that Native women are promiscuous and objects of public vilification.

Some older Native people find the word so derogatory, that they have not been able to talk about it. Academicians, most of whom seem to believe that the original native forms of the word were neutral, generally agree that "squaw" rapidly came to have a negative, disrespectful, insulting meaning in its English use.

Thank you for your patience and consideration. We urge your passage of this bill.

Testimony of Brenda Commander
Tribal Chief
Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians
Before the Judiciary Committee
Augusta, Maine
January 28, 2000

Good Morning. I come before you this morning as a Native woman, daughter, mother of a daughter... and the Chief of the Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians, to tell you how the use of the word squaw has affected my life, and that of my mother... my sisters... my aunt's... and the lives of all the women of my tribe.

I have not spoken to even one Maliseet woman who is not offended by the use of the word squaw. We do not know how the word originated... but we are certain it did not originate from our tongue. We

did not use the term to describe ourselves....it was cast upon us by the white settlers. We are unsure of its original meaning, but we do know how it came to be used. It has been used to taunt and degrade us as women. The word has come to be felt as the word whore feels... dirty, degrading, and shameful.

My people have suffered great indignation under white rule in Houlton for many generations. We did not have a land base before 1980 but for safety and community, our families settled in the same area.... always delegated to the least desirable land.

One experience that is burned into my memory was coming home one day and seeing a big road sign at the end of our road that said SQUAW KNOLL.

When I entered my home I found my mother in tears... she was so humiliated. Can you for a moment imagine how a black American finding a sign had been erected by the town government at the end of their road that read Nigger Knoll would feel? We felt no less insulted. My mother made my two brothers go down and remove the sign. It was a very courageous act... because she knew that they could be charged with tampering with town property. But it was more important to not allow our people to be treated with such blatant racism. The sign did not return... the road now carries the name Cogan Road.

Long before the current debate over the word began we shared the common experience of being

taunted by the word squaw. Women of my tribe describe the taunting they were subjected to in the 60's in downtown Houlton as children and teenagers, being surrounded by local white youth giving their imitation (as seen on television) of a Indian war cry and calling them squaws. Native young people did not venture downtown alone...but even in the company of others they were not safeguarded from verbal assaults... and it certainly did not come from young people only.... it was just as likely to come from an adult.

I would like to be able to say that such things would not happen today but I cannot. As recently as two years ago, one of our tribal elders, a woman, was

standing in front of the County courthouse in downtown Houlton, when a group of youth circled her doing their imitation of a war yelp, calling her 'squaw'. It was a devastating experience for her... bringing back all the old hurts.

As a people who for so long have not had a voice that was heard in Maine we did not feel empowered to even think about addressing this issue.... we are thankful to _____ for bringing this issue to the public conscience and giving us a voice.

LD 2418 "An Act Concerning Offensive Names"
State Legislative Hearing, 1/28/2000
Testimony

My name is Emma Nicolar. I am a 58 year old Penobscot woman. I want to express my gratitude to those individuals who have worked so hard and persistently to get this bill where it is today. This "Act" is a long time overdue.

I am a Penobscot Indian woman-- I am not a "squaw" although I have been called that many times in my life. I don't have the time to detail here how detrimental this societal abuse was to the development of my character, and certainly I won't go into what I've had to do to heal from the pain that it inflicted, but I did heal. I was born on the Penobscot Indian Reservation in Maine in 1942 but grew up in other areas other than the reservation. My parents separated when I was around 4 years old and I went to live in Connecticut. My mother later put us in a foster home in Milford, ME. I was six years old then, and that is where I first remember being degraded and made to feel like "doggie poo" (mild expletive) because I was an Indian. I went to live with my dad on Indian Island when I was 11 years old, and went to Old Town schools. In gang units Old Town youths were famous for calling me and others "squaw", dirty Indians, and making sexually unacceptable remarks. During the 1940's and 1950's what did anyone know of unacceptable behavior—next to nothing! I had to grin and bear whatever came my way. It was at this time, junior high I believe, that I began to develop a defensive attitude. Playing basketball or engaging in other athletic activities, if I was better at the game, the only way the non-Indian girls could put me down was to make remarks about my being an Indian—not just one-on-one, but always as a group/gang. The chip on my shoulder grew during my teenage years, and at one time I carried a knife on me at all times and used it a couple of times when physically accosted by non-Indian boys. I went to live in Massachusetts during high school with an older brother and had hoped that being Indian wouldn't follow me there. But it did. My sister and I were the only two Indians in the school system and we were never allowed to forget it. I have never been endeared by

non-Indians for my ethnic background, but always the edge of dirt, filth, and second-rate citizen was present in their remarks. Needless to say I became an adult with no self esteem. However, I had one characteristic which saved me—perseverence. I was going to survive in spite of all the name calling and hurt and I did. Today, I know all about bigotry, slander, prejudice, and how to protect myself from the hurt and pain. I've watched the Native population of this country struggle, just as the Negro population have, to gain respect and dignity. You cannot get away with calling me "squaw" today because I know the laws and will use them against you. You cannot call my daughter names, or my son, and get away with it because I will come to their rescue if they can't handle it themselves. I have held the current school systems accountable for prejudices displayed during my children's education.

Squaw Valley, California, and Squaw Mountain, Maine, are two very beautiful places. I consider myself a beautiful person today, and will not tolerate being called "squaw". Change these names in this new millennium, and transform these sites back to their natural beauty. If you must continue to use Native ethnicity as a basis for naming these sites, there are some beautiful names in the Native languages which would be more appropriate. I have argued at another committee meeting about the use of the word "sovereignty", as I argue today about the use of the word "squaw." We as Native peoples never needed these words, we have always known who we are and have a language to describe ourselves. These are your words, and "squaw" is a misnomer. I'm sure we're all familiar with the description of this word in Webster's Collegiate Dictionary. But have you ever taken the time to find out what an Indian woman was called in her own language. Each tribal language is different but each tribe has a word, or derivatives thereof, for designating a Native woman or describing a Native woman. Do these place names that contain "squaw" today have to have an ethnic tone? How far would you get today if you called these places "Frog Mountain", "Nigger Mountain", or some such ethnic slur? We are adults today, and possess the power to make changes, and I pray to the power to my understanding that you will change all place names with the word "squaw" in it in the State of Maine.