

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 word "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[<sup>a</sup>]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.