

FCP Museum News

On the Lake Geneva/Chief Big Foot Issue

submitted by Vince Leppert, Historical Researcher for the FCP Cultural Center and Museum

On May 19, 2006, I received a phone call from Mrs. Bonnie Alton from the town of Lake Geneva, Wis., in which she informed me about a missing historical bronze plaque, signifying the burial ground of Chief Big Foot's wife. The plaque was affixed to a huge rock and located on an undeveloped property on Elm Street in Williams Bay on Lake Geneva. The plaque reads:

"In 1836, on the crest of this ground was buried, on a platform and dressed in Indian finery, a wife of Big Foot, chief of the Lake Geneva Potawatomi. Later, earth burial was made probably by Captain Israel Williams, the first [white] settler of Williams Bay."

The plaque was first erected during a ceremony held in 1929. As Simon Kahquados represented the Forest County Potawatomi as their speaker, he shared some of the history and culture of his ancestors. His mother had lived for a while in Chief Big Foot's village. Also present at this occasion were Charles E. Brown, then director of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, and Paul B. Jenkins, a local scholar from Lake Geneva. Driven by curiosity and excitement,

a crowd of local citizens also attended the dedication of the historical marker.

Ever since then, the property on Elm Street remained undeveloped. The park-like property was well-cared for and everybody in Williams Bay knew of this important site and respected it. Unfortunately, in early 2006 the rock bolder with the bronze plaque was gone. With it disappeared a symbol of the presence of the Potawatomi in the Lake Geneva region almost 200 years ago.

What had happened? In my responsibility as the historical researcher for the Forest County Potawatomi Community, I drove down to Williams Bay to bring some light into this mysterious situation. In my conversations with town officials and local citizens on May 22, 2006, it turned out that the owner of the property had sold the site to a couple from Illinois without telling them about its cultural and historical significance. The former owner had removed the marker before closing date. Alarmed neighbors and town officials called the man and insisted to have "their history" returned to its original location. While the former owner got

more and more reluctant and angry, concerned local citizens (especially Bonnie Alton, Lake Geneva, and Ann Becker, director of the Barrett Memorial Library in Williams Bay) informed several newspapers about this case. All newspaper articles that followed shared the deep concerns of local citizens and village officials not only about the missing historical marker, but also about the question if human remains still rest in the grounds. The village president of Williams Bay, Don Weyhrauch, doubted there will be any construction on the lot of Elm Street No. 49 if it turns out to be a burial ground.

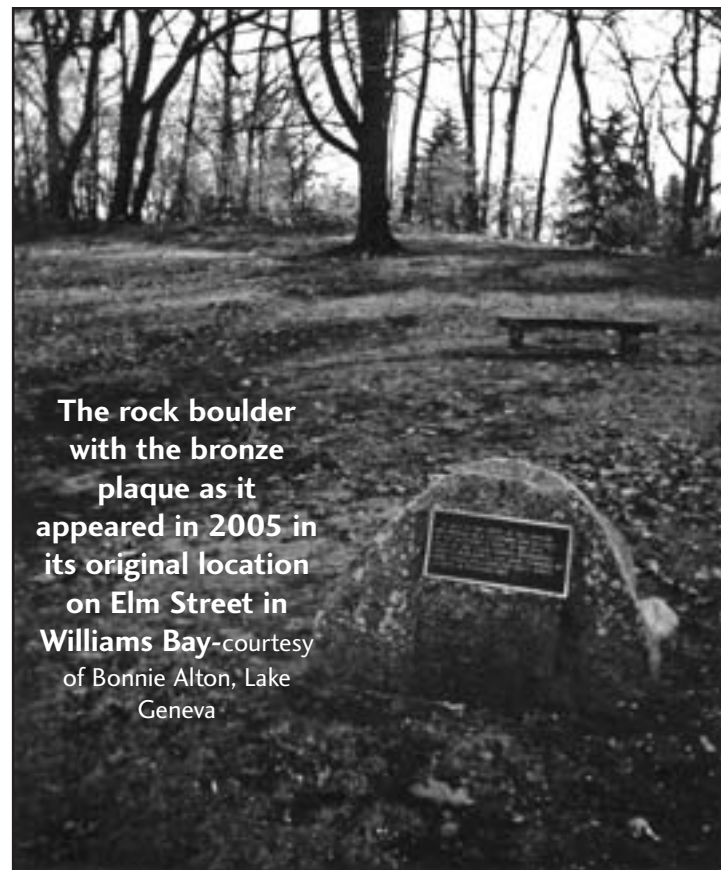
Eventually, after two months of public upheaval, the former owner delivered the historical marker to the town of Williams Bay. It is now located in front of the town hall of Williams Bay.

The question still remained on how this site can be protected from any future desecration or construction plans? On June 21, 2006, Al Milham, vice-chairman of the Forest County Potawatomi Community, tribal attorney Jo Deen Lowe, Mike Alloway, director of the FCP Cultural Center and Museum, and myself met with officials of Williams Bay in order to discuss the community's concerns. During the meeting, everybody agreed that the actions of the former owner were not acceptable. Both the delegates of the Forest County Potawatomi Community and the officials of the town of Williams Bay expressed their strong

will to protect the site. The town of Williams Bay promised to contact the new owner to get permission for a GPR examination of the grounds (GPR – Ground Penetrating Radar), so that we could find out if there are human remains in the ground. The Ho-Chunk Nation (Bill Quakenbusch) do operate such equipment and have already offered their support. The next step will be to contact the State Historical Preservation Office in Madison in order get the site registered and finally protected by the State of Wisconsin.

Finally, I would like to thank Mrs. Bonnie Alton in particular for calling us here at the Cultural Center and Museum. She also provided me with further information about the situation in Williams Bay, and took the time to be my tour guide to historical Potawatomi sites in the Lake Geneva region. McGweth.

PS: An article on Chief Big Foot and the Lake Geneva Potawatomi will follow in one of the next issues of the PTT.



The rock boulder with the bronze plaque as it appeared in 2005 in its original location on Elm Street in Williams Bay—courtesy of Bonnie Alton, Lake Geneva



The rock boulder in front of the town hall of Williams Bay, "protected" by Vince Leppert, Al Milham, Mike Alloway, and town president Don Weyhrauch, June 21, 2006 - photograph taken by Jo Deen Lowe, FCP attorney



Al and Mike side-by-side with a statue of Chief Big Foot. The statue is located on a golf course near Fontana at the western edge of Lake Geneva. The course covers the "Seven Sacred Springs" where in earlier times the Potawatomi had vision quests and religious ceremonies – photograph taken by Vince Leppert, June 21, 2006

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