

Lenapes seeking a base

Tribe wants culture preserved, Pennsylvania site

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — Hundreds of years ago, Jim Beer's forefathers canoed down the Delaware River to hunt, fish and trade the fruits of their harvest. Now, he is tracing their path in a 330-mile trek to raise awareness of the Lenape tribe's historic past and its perilous future.

The American Indian tribe, which once called home the fertile farms and woodlands of the East Coast from upstate New York to the tip of Delaware, are losing their sacred sites to neglect, their language and customs to a lack of resources, Beer said. He hopes the trek will mark an important step toward getting local Lenapes and the state to sustain the tribe's history.

"The only ancient history of Pennsylvania is our people's history," said Beer, who lives in northern Bucks County. "So preserving Lenape history is preserving the ancient history of Pennsylvania."

Beer has been joined by friends, day-tripping canoeists and environmental groups along the route, which started Aug. 4 at the top of the Delaware River in Hancock, N.Y.

About a half dozen canoes arrived yesterday afternoon at Philadelphia's Penn Treaty Park, where Pennsylvania's founder William Penn signed a treaty with Lenape Chief Tamamend that Europeans and Indians would live together in peace

as long "as the creeks and rivers run and while the sun, moon, and stars endure."

After a one-week rest, the group will travel 30 miles back north to Bucks County's Pennsbury Manor, Penn's former estate, in Morrisville to sign a "treaty of renewed brotherhood" on Aug. 24.

The treaty will be signed between the Lenape and the Delaware River Greenway Partnership, a consortium of more than 100 government agencies and nonprofit groups. The journey will then head south again and finishes with a celebration in Cape May, N.J., on Sept. 1.

"Our goals are consistent with theirs: preserving and protecting ecology, history, culture," said partnership president Richard McNitt, who has traveled the entire trek with Beer. "For their culture to disappear is almost a cruelty to humanity and we are committed to helping them keep their culture alive in every way we can."

The journey and treaty is meant to forge a new relationship between the Lenape and communities along the Delaware River, inspired by the brotherhood between the Lenape and Penn, that organizers hope will bring grass-roots and government support for reversing the Lenape's cultural crisis.

Only a small handful of elders fluently speak Lenape, a version of the Algonquian language. The

tribe also says its fading oral history needs to be documented for posterity and many of its sacred sites and burial grounds must be cataloged and preserved.

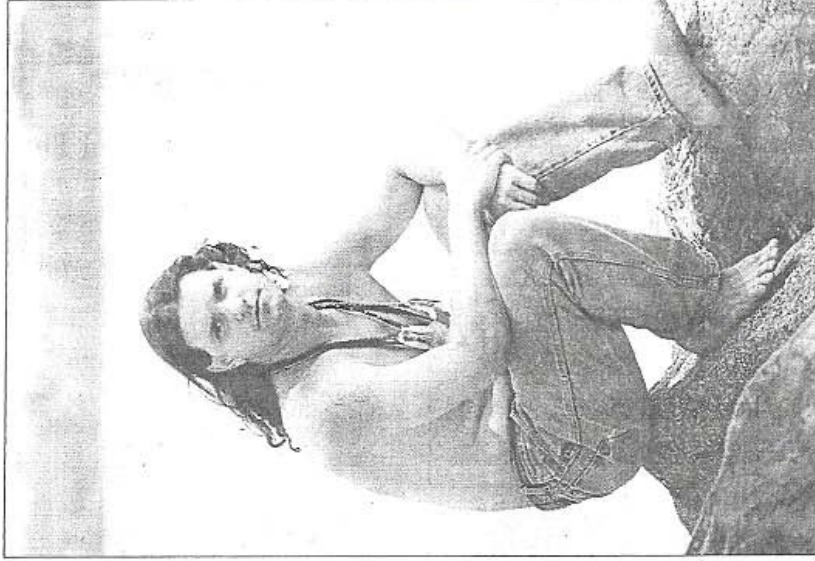
The tribe also is hoping for donated land for a Pennsylvania cultural center — a home base for preservation efforts and community activities.

"Every culture, wherever it is you come from, has a land base. That's something we don't have in Pennsylvania," Beer said.

The Lenape, also known as Lenni Lenape (roughly translated as "real people"), lived in independent villages and bands and settled in large numbers along the Delaware River, which led European settlers to call them the Delaware tribe.

Their troubles began when English, Swedish and Dutch settlers began to encroach upon Lenape territory in the 17th century. The Lenape also were forced to give up much of their land in treaties including the infamous Walking Purchase of 1737, a swindle perpetrated by Penn's sons that cheated the tribe out of 1,200 square miles — a plot the size of Rhode Island.

Many Lenape were pushed westward into areas that are now Pennsylvania and Ohio, and wars and epidemics cut their numbers from as many as 20,000 people in 1690 to about 2,000 by 1850. People with Lenape ancestry are now scattered throughout Oklahoma, Wisconsin and



AP Photo
Jim Beer sits yesterday in Penn Treaty Park along the Delaware River. Beer, a member of the Lenape American Indian tribe, is tracing the tribe's history.

Ontario, Canada; several hundred families remain in Pennsylvania.
Lenape site: <http://lenape.net>
River journey: www.lenapeculture.org
On the Net