



*A Lenape fan made of beads, deerskin and feathers rests in the hands of Shelley DePaul, director of the Language Program for the Lenape Nation of Pennsylvania and a co-curator of the new exhibition Fulfilling a Prophecy: The Past and Present of the Lenape in Pennsylvania. The fan, a recent gift to Ms. DePaul, is rich in Lenape symbolism. It is one of about 60 objects borrowed from local Lenape people for the new exhibition, which opened at the Penn Museum with a public celebration on September 13, 2008.*

# HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

## SENIOR ABIGAIL SELDIN TELLS THE UNTOLD HISTORY OF THE PENNSYLVANIA LENAPE

BY PRIYA RATNESHWAR

PHOTOS BY LAUREN HANSEN-FLASCHEN

Conshohocken, Manayunk, Wissahickon—these and many other appellations throughout Philadelphia mark the city’s location in Lenapehocking, the Lenape homelands. Members of this Native American tribe once inhabited an area stretching from Delaware to Connecticut until colonists pushed them off their lands and drove them westward. Conventional histories of Pennsylvania claim that all but a few elderly Lenape people left the state by the beginning of the 19th century, but anthropology major and recent Rhodes Scholarship winner Abigail Seldin, C’09, G’09, has devoted nearly three years of her Penn experience to correcting this “official” story.

Seldin’s research culminated in *Fulfilling a Prophecy: The Past and the Present of the Lenape in Pennsylvania*—the first exhibition at the Penn Museum to be curated by an undergraduate. The genesis of the exhibition, which opened last fall and will run through September, was a project Seldin undertook as a sophomore in a National Science Foundation undergraduate research program operated by the Penn Museum. She initially planned to develop a small exhibition that broadly treated the trek of the Lenape from Pennsylvania to their current locations in a number of Western and Midwestern states and in Canada. But Seldin’s plans changed drastically when her advisor, anthropology professor and Penn Museum curator Robert Preucel, invited her to accompany museum personnel in lending a traditional paddle to the Lenape Nation of Pennsylvania at a

maple ceremony in the Pocono Mountains. The opportunity revealed to her a community—and a history—she had not known existed.

Facing persecution, Seldin learned, Lenape who did not leave the region “hid in plain sight.” Many married European settlers and appeared to assimilate, but in private they maintained their language, as well as their cultural and religious practices. For the past 200 years, successive generations have been upholding these traditions in secret, fearing discrimination. Seldin found that in the past two decades, however, the community has been moving toward making its existence public, motivated in part by a strong commitment to promoting better environmental stewardship of the Lenapehocking.



*Traditional Lenape corn husk dolls. Dolls play an important role in Lenape culture, both as children's toys and ceremonial objects.*

“Meeting these people and hearing their story, which is a magnificent story of cultural survival in the face of unconquerable odds, really made me want to redirect the project to being about the Lenape in Pennsylvania in particular,” Seldin says.

Seldin invited Chief Robert Red Hawk Ruth of the Lenape Nation of Pennsylvania and former tribal secretary Shelley DePaul to co-curate the exhibit. Their participation, Seldin explains, puts *Fulfilling a Prophecy* on the cutting

edge of museum practices in anthropology. “This level of collaboration between an anthropologist and Native American representatives is really unusual in the United States,” she says. “I think it points to the progressiveness of Penn and the museum. They’re willing to make a stand that we will not perpetuate colonialist structures that treat people as unworthy of telling their own histories.”

In the process of learning about Lenape culture from her co-curators, Seldin wound up sharing her own. For her first meeting with Ruth and DePaul, which took place just before the Jewish holiday of Purim, she baked hamantaschen. “It was an all-day meeting, and it occurred to me that it would be really good to have some snacks around,” she says. “But it turned out beautifully because after talking about symbolism in the collections for three hours, Shelley started nibbling on a hamantasch and asked if there was significance to the triangular shape. So, I told them about Purim and how I’d grown up with this story and how this was part of my culture. I think the fact that I had such a strong cultural identity made it much easier for them to trust that I would be respectful of theirs, rather than if I were looking at it like a scientist through a microscope.”

This trust, Seldin believes, helped foster Lenape participation in the exhibition. Fulfilling a Prophecy draws not only from archaeological, historical and ethnographic research but also relies on oral histories, photographs and a number of family heirlooms—rich with hidden symbolism—

## RHODES SCHOLAR



This fall, Abigail Seldin will continue the research inspired by her work on *Fulfilling a Prophecy* as a Rhodes Scholar at the University of Oxford. One of just 32 students from across the nation to receive a prestigious 2009 Rhodes Scholarship, Seldin plans to study

anthropology at Oxford’s Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology.

Harriet Joseph, director of the Center for Undergraduate Research and Fellowships (CURF) at Penn, encouraged Seldin to apply for the scholarship. “Abby has a knack for the practice of research,” Joseph says. “She is a spectacularly intelligent young woman, and I am certain that the Rhodes will be only the first step in her career after Penn.”

Seldin became involved with CURF during her freshman year, when she successfully became a University Scholar. She says the University Scholars

program, which mentors and helps fund undergraduate research, is one of many opportunities she received from Penn to pursue her passion for anthropology. “The Lenape exhibit is a project I could only have done at Penn because of all of the support that’s given to undergraduate research here,” she says. “It has defined my student experience and given me a mission.”

At Oxford, Seldin hopes to further her mission by exploring “how museums can be venues for civic discourse, and how they can inspire tolerance and become centers for discussions about human rights.”

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# HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

to represent a cultural past that is very much “alive and personal.” One display, for example, is a handmade quilt with one square missing—seemingly a simple mistake. But to the Lenape, who embed an ‘error’ in all their crafts, it is a purposeful sign of spiritual humility.

Seldin was especially gratified that those who contributed objects were able to benefit from the museum’s preservation practices. “Many of these pieces had been kept for 200 years in a closet or under a bed,” she says. “The museum’s conservation department has to stabilize everything that goes on display, and lots of people were ready to give us their entire collections to be stabilized because these things are so precious.”

Such personal contributions, Seldin explains, are essential to *Fulfilling a Prophecy’s* goal of reintroducing the Lenape to the local community and recognizing their place in it. The exhibition’s title refers to the Lenape Prophecy of the Fourth Crow, which they believe represents their history from pre-contact with colonists to the present day. Ruth summarizes, “We now know that the First Crow was the Lenape before the coming of the Europeans. The Second Crow symbolized the death and destruction of our culture. The Third Crow was our people going underground and hiding. The Fourth Crow was the Lenape becoming caretakers again and working with everybody to restore this land.” Seldin says that many Pennsylvania Lenape view the exhibition as an important step toward fulfilling the final part of this prophecy.

In addition to serving as a case study for involving Native Americans in the curatorial process, another primary academic goal of the exhibition is to ensure that the story of the Lenape in Pennsylvania is written into history. To that end Seldin and Ruth are co-authoring a companion book that will be published by Penn Museum Publications. “It’s really important that this book will be published by a respected academic publisher,” Seldin says. “It’ll be a really nice counterpoint to the last 200 years of written history, which says that this community doesn’t exist.”

The public’s embrace of *Fulfilling a Prophecy* has far exceeded Seldin’s expectations. More than a thousand visitors attended the exhibition’s opening, and Seldin learned that a *Philadelphia Inquirer* piece on the exhibition received hundreds of responses within a few hours of publication.



*Chief Robert Red Hawk Ruth, Shelley DePaul and Abigail Seldin take a look at some of the Lenape objects in the Penn Museum’s collections storage.*

A wall at the exhibition is covered in notes bearing departing thoughts from visitors, and Seldin has memorized her favorite. It reads, “When I was a child in Reading [PA], I had always hoped to meet a Lenape Indian. Maybe I did, and I never knew.”

Seldin comments, “I think this kind of response shows that people really understand that this is a history of their land—the land that they’ve been living on.” ♦