

Testimony in Support of LD 785 An Act to Enact the Remaining Recommendations of the Task Force on Changes to the Maine Indian Claims Settlement Implementing Act by Cassandra Wright, Parishioner & Member of the Penobscot Nation Neighbors Committee, St. James' Episcopal Church, Old Town, presented to the Judiciary Committee, 2/19/26

Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and members of the Judiciary Committee; my name is Cassandra Wright. I live in Orono, grew up in Old Town, and testify today on behalf of St. James' Episcopal Church, Old Town, in support of LD 785 An Act to Enact the Remaining Recommendations of the Task Force on Changes to the Maine Indian Claims Settlement Implementing Act.

We as St. James' Episcopal Church approach the work of supporting Wabanaki sovereignty and self-determination as a fundamental issue of justice and striving to live out Jesus' directive to all his followers to love our neighbors as ourselves. In our Baptismal Covenant, we are asked if we will "strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?" Multiple books and passages of the Bible proclaim the imperative for humans to seek justice in all aspects of our lives.

Extensive evidence has been presented for decades concerning the unjust provisions of the Maine Implementing Act. Many of these injustices were identified and discussed during the Task Force on Changes to the Maine Indian Claims Settlement Implementing Act. LD 785 proposes making law all the unaddressed recommendations from the Task Force process. Their enactment is long overdue.

We cannot undo the past, but we can learn from it. Let's look at a relevant historical event that happened over 250 years ago. While Paul Revere was making his famous ride in April of 1775, trouble was also brewing some 300 miles north in the village of Machias. That summer loyalist merchant ships arrived accompanied by the sloop Margarettta. Townspeople tried to arrest the captain who escaped. Two ships, one captained by Jeremiah O'Brien, overcame the Margarettta and the settlers won the first naval battle of the revolution. The settlers had some pivotal assistance in this landmark battle. The Passamaquoddy supported this effort and helped in the capture of the ship. Fifty of them, led by Captain Selmore Soctomah, then captured a British schooner and brought it to Machias to add to the growing settler fleet. Both O'Brien and Soctomah went on to play major roles in the fight for independence. It is important to note that the Wabanaki have always served in America's military in positive and disproportionate numbers.

This war for independence brought an end to the oppression of a foreign government and resulted in sovereignty for the American settlers. However, homegrown colonialism continues to oppress the Wabanaki Nations. In the 250 years since our ancestors fought together in the bay at Machias, the Wabanaki have suffered from dehumanization, broken promises, the removal of children from their homes, and the lack of access to support from the federal government.

Despite everything done to the Wabanaki they have survived, demonstrated incredible resilience and faith to their ancestors and future generations, and refused to be assimilated. They have always asserted their inherent sovereignty. Descendants of both O'Brien's sister, Mary O'Brien Burnham, and Selmore Soctomah still live, work and worship in the area and are striving for justice and opportunity. The passage of LD 785 would honor the sacrifices that the Wabanaki made for our ancestors securing our freedom. We don't have to give our lives as the Wabanaki did. We can act with justice.

The State of Maine Legislature as best can be determined was the first legislative body in North America to express support for the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples enacted by the General Assembly September 13, 2007.* Article 3 of the Declaration states,

Article 3

Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

And Article 4 says,

Article 4

Indigenous peoples, in exercising their right to self-determination, have the right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs, as well as ways and means for financing their autonomous functions.

Multiple provisions of the Maine Implementing Act impinge upon Wabanaki self-determination. As a matter of conscience and our best effort to live out our faith in the world, we ask the Judiciary Committee to report LD 785 ought to pass and help to restore a greater sense of justice to Wabanaki-State of Maine relations.

* Joint Resolution in Support of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples HP 1681 enacted 4/15/08