

ASINABKA AND THE TALKING WATER – Part 1 of 2

By Karen Bisson © National Indigenous Day, June 21, 2017

An editorial for those who support Algonquin Elder William Commanda's vision, for those who are hearing about it for the first time, and especially for those who are making choices that affect us all. **Remember...Ginawaydaganuk!**

VISION
 Commemorating Chaudière Falls' 90th Birthday Celebration
 94 - A Circle of All Nations: A Culture of Peace - 2003

The Sacred Wampum Belts
 The 1700's Belt
 The Seven Fires Prophecy Belt
 The Joy Treaty Border Crossing Belt

Asinabka - Place of Glare Rock

- Sacred Circle of Nations Meeting Grounds at Victoria Island
- Forested Chaudière Island
- Undammed Chaudière Rapids

The Core Vision

- Healing Indigenous Peoples
- Healing relationships with others
- Healing relationships with Mother Earth

OJIGWANONG
 William Commanda, great grandson of Ojigwanong, the first chief of the Algonquins, was born in 1885 in the village of Chaudière Falls, Ontario. He was born to a family of traditional hunters and fishermen. He was a man of many talents and a great leader. He was a man of many talents and a great leader. He was a man of many talents and a great leader.

A Circle of All Nations A Culture of Peace

"It was prophesied that the time would come when the voice of indigenous peoples would rise again after five hundred years of silence and oppression, to light a path to an eternal fire of peace, love, brotherhood and sisterhood amongst all nations."

"We must come together with one heart, one mind, one love and one determination."
 -William Commanda "OJIGWANONG"

"The one thing that the developers have not offered is the one thing that the people need... the sacred site restored in keeping with the late Algonquin Elder William Commanda's vision."

Asinabka, at the site of the Chaudière Falls in downtown Ottawa, is an ancient Indigenous sacred site that is at least 8000 years old, according to the late Algonquin Elder Dr. William Commanda, OC.

Despite decades of lobbying by the elder to see the site restored, Chaudière Island, the land at the very core of the site and the only island that actually faces the falls, is slated for privatization and commercial development by Windmill Development Group with their controversial Zibi project.

The purpose of this document is to provide historical context and evidence that the site is indeed sacred, and to ask the public to act immediately by contacting the Federal Government as well as the City of Ottawa, and by joining the campaign to support the restoration of this site in keeping with William Commanda's vision.

Part 1 of this article provides historical context and a brief biography of Elder William Commanda. Part 2 contains information regarding the current challenges for control of the site.

REVERED ALGONQUIN ELDER CALLS FOR THE RESTORATION OF THE ASINABKA SACRED SITE

William Commanda believed the Chaudière Falls and surrounding area is a sacred site and campaigned for decades before his death in 2011 to have the Chaudière Island restored to public parkland, to have steps taken to gradually remove the Chaudière Dam to restore the falls to their former glory, and to build a National Indigenous Centre on Victoria Island.

In 1998, with his long-time companion Romola Thumbadoo and renowned First Nation's architect Douglas Cardinal, Grandfather William began touring the Algonquin communities to share the vision with his people of a restored sacred site. He gained the unanimous support of all ten Algonquin bands and by 2003 they had a comprehensive plan. Grandfather called Asinabka '*The Sacred Jewel in the Nation's Crown*', in the formal [proposal he presented to the City of Ottawa in February 2010](#) for the Indigenous sacred site. For years they worked hard to lobby the government, built his website www.Asinabka.com and held many gatherings to educate and garner support while continuing Grandfather William's Circle of All Nations work around Indigenous, environmental and social issues.

On Nov. 19, 2010 the City of Ottawa sent a brief reply to his proposal, stating a recommendation that Council provide "support for a National Indigenous Centre on Victoria Island."

WHO WAS WILLIAM COMMANDA? (Nov. 11, 1913 – Aug. 8, 2011)

Grandfather William, as he was respectfully known, was both hereditary and elected chief of the Algonquin community of Kitigan Zibi for 20 years. He was carrier of three sacred wampum belts of cultural and historical significance, including the *Three Figure Welcoming Belt*, the *Jay Treaty Border Crossing Belt*, and the *Seven Fires Prophecy Belt*. (More information about the sacred wampum belts can be found at the end of this article.)

The elder was also made an Officer of the Order of Canada, and was an Indigenous lifetime achievement award winner. The tributes continued to pour in even after his death. Romola offered a treasured and intimate glimpse into the [days of Grandfather's passing](#) through her blog, noting that he had been looking forward to receiving a new Honorary Doctorate Degree from the Université du Québec en Outaouais, which was to have be presented on September 12, 2011.

Grandfather William had earlier received an honorary doctorate degree from the University of Ottawa as well as a Justice Award. The University of Ottawa also offers a medical school scholarship in his name, launched the Indigenous Studies program at his teaching lodge, and created the William Commanda Hall in recognition of his many contributions to the University and the capital city. Clearly, this was a man who was deeply loved and well respected by many.

William Commanda was also a recipient of the Key to the City of Ottawa in 2006. The key was presented to him at a celebration held on Victoria Island at the site he envisioned for the National Indigenous Centre. The event was attended by a large group, which included family, friends, the Mayor and several politicians. We printed hundreds of copies of his primary speech, which included details of the vision for Asinabka, on golden coloured paper and distributed them to the guests.

Douglas Cardinal, a long-time friend of Grandfather's and strong advocate for fulfilling the entire vision, created an architectural blueprint of the plans for the National Indigenous Centre. Cardinal was also the architect for the Canadian Museum of History in Hull.

Fifty years ago, Grandfather William began hosting annual spiritual gatherings, starting with the first in Eganville and later at his home on the reserve in Kitigan Zibi, to which thousands of people made a pilgrimage from around the globe. Grandfather William also held several other regular events throughout the year, some of which Romola continues to carry on in support of his legacy.

Over the years, I attended as many of their events as possible and was especially grateful to have been at the very last spiritual gathering, which many of us are sure Grandfather William himself choreographed in fine detail from the spirit world. Grandfather William passed away on August 3, 2011, at his home in Maniwaki two days before the annual gathering began. Hundreds of people had already begun to gather or were on their way when he passed, and so the gathering turned funeral, and then celebration of his life.

Many people have been affected by Grandfather William's work. I had the profound good fortune to have met Grandfather William 15 years ago and found myself assisting him and Romola with several of their projects over the years, including their book '*Learning from a Kindergarten Dropout*', and Grandfather's vision website for www.asinabka.com, which remains preserved for integrity pretty much as he left it with the exception of notices of upcoming activities and new articles in the documents section that have been written or sanctioned by Romola over the years as she tirelessly continues to maintain his legacy.

IS ASINABKA REALLY A SACRED SITE?

"Sacred is defined as that which is set apart from the ordinary world and is the object of veneration and awe. We become aware of the sacred when it shows itself as something different from the profane." ~ Author unknown

Asinabka (meaning place of glare rock), also known by many other names, was well known by Indigenous across Turtle Island (North America). It's likely many tribes had their own names for it as well. But was it really an ancient *sacred* site? According to Elder Commanda it was, and there are some indicators to suggest this may even be one of the most ancient sacred sites on the planet.

The existence of the Chaudière dam, built 100 years ago for its hydroelectric potential, is merely the blink of an eye in the life of this magnificent site. Four hundred years ago, Samuel de Champlain witnessed the ancestors of the Algonquin Nation conducting Tobacco ceremonies at a freely flowing Chaudière Falls, on the great *Kichi Sibi* (Ottawa) River. Dating of Indigenous burial sites recently found under and beside the Canadian Museum of History in Hull, on the northern side slightly downstream from the Chaudière Falls, confirm that this site was inhabited 6,000-8,000 years ago, longer in fact than the pyramids in Egypt are estimated to have been around.

Archeologists continue to find more signs that man was indeed living on Turtle Island many thousands of years earlier than originally estimated. According to [Dr. Jean-Luc Pilon, Curator of Ontario Archaeology at the Canadian Museum of Civilization](#), the Ottawa valley contains thousands of [archeological sites](#), few of which have been studied in detail. Evidence of human habitation along the Ottawa river dates back to the last ice-age. Archeologists agree that wide networks of trading and communications, enabled by the Ottawa River and its tributaries, existed thousands of years before Europeans arrived.

More details about the history of the Ottawa River can be found in the background study compiled in 2005 for the nomination of the Ottawa River under the Canadian Heritage Rivers System, (<http://www.ottawariver.org/>) William Commanda was part of the Background Study Writing Team. After a decade-long campaign, last year the Ontario side of the river was designated as a Canadian Heritage River. The Quebec side is expected to follow.

INDIGENOUS VALUES AND CONCEPTS

The spring of 2017 shattered existing records for rainfall and water levels on the Ottawa River and its major tributaries. Flood damage is estimated to be in the millions of dollars. Rushing waters surged across the dam at the Chaudière Falls where the Indigenous sacred site known as Asinabka is located. Nearby structures were at risk, forcing closure for several days of the Chaudière Bridge and neighbouring provincial and federal government offices, including the INAC building in Hull. The flooding also caused damage in the area currently slated for private condo and retail development.

Grandfather William would likely have said, "*The Water is talking.*" I say this as I recall a similar statement he made one very windy day during a visit to my home when I lived in Crown Point near Constance Bay. "*The Wind is talking to you,*" he had said.

Indigenous all around the world are noted to have often searched for signs or omens in nature. Special places, such as waterfalls, springs and wells were, commonly identified as sacred sites. Ancient cultures often reserved exceptional places, such as waterfalls and other unique natural formations, for ceremony

and the resting places of their dead. This fact lends credence to the idea that Indigenous really did maintain the area around the Chaudière Falls for spiritual ceremony and considered it sacred.

It seems quite natural to think of Chaudière Island, the island at the base of the raging falls, as being the most precise spot in which to honour the Great Spirit with offerings and prayer. Particularly since it is the only island with a view of the falls. The bowl, coupled with the ever-present rainbow bubble that appeared in the mist, must surely have seemed other-worldly to the Indigenous who roamed the land hundreds and thousands of years ago. The gorge and falls at Asinabka must have also seemed particularly unusual in the way they are connected to underground caverns, with channels that made unusual sounds, and where water and objects mysteriously disappeared.

The massive bowl shape falls are often likened to the stem and bowl of a sacred pipe. Sacred pipe teachings explain that the bowl is feminine and the stem is male, the life and function of which is incomplete without the joining of the two. As above, so below. The metaphysical connotations of this and other Indigenous concepts are endless and extraordinary.

Water is a primordial element underlying many creation myths and stories around the world. Grandfather William's rare upbringing with Grandparents who hid him away from the residential school system, taught him that rivers are the life blood of the planet. He likened dams to the effects of cholesterol clogging up our veins and shutting off the oxygen flow to our brains and bodies. He talked about how the rivers affect the life of the land for miles around it. He talked about a time when the rivers in this area teemed with eels and other aquatic life, which were a staple in the diet of the people, and how those eels connect this area to the oceans and the rest of the planet. He talked about how the eel population almost died off in this area because of the dams, and how very serious this was to the health of the rest of the planet, even if we didn't quite see it yet. He spoke of natural flow versus the increasing flooding, and how "confused" the rivers had become because of the dams. He spoke of how people have forgotten to bless and thank the water. He said his ancestors believed that water is a sentient element of Mother Earth, and you can hear it, and it can talk, if you know how to listen; it can sense and remember things too. [Science is only just starting to catch up to Indigenous knowledge.](#)



Lindsay Lambert, a researcher and friend of Elder Commanda, noted how the conjunction of the three rivers (Ottawa, Gatineau and Rideau), as they meet below Chaudière Falls, resembles a medicine wheel, with the rivers separating the four quadrants. Using an aerial map and the colour blue to delineate the water ways, Lindsay created the image on the left, which has now become popular symbol for the freethefalls.ca organization, also committed to upholding Grandfather William's vision.

Note that the recently discovered burial site at the museum is located precisely on the downward tip of the white/north segment. This may be coincidental but its intriguing to consider that cultures from around the world who reference some form of medicine wheel very often depict the north as the place of the ancestors, elders (white hair), winter, and that which has passed on to the other side.

"In-between" times and places were considered very special. Dusk and dawn, (half way between night and day), places like shorelines, (halfway between land and water), were thought to be special doorways to other worlds where loved ones would go when they passed away. Waterfalls in particular stood out in this way.

To bury their dead in such a holy and particularly ancient place such as Asinabka would have been highly desirable to be as close as possible to the ancestors, ensuring safer travel and shorter passage to the other side. And as ancient goes, Asinabka may well have been one of the most ancient on the planet.

POSSIBLY THE MOST ANCIENT SACRED SITE ON THE PLANET

The Gatineau Hills situated north of Ottawa/Hull are part of the Laurentian Mountains, which are one of the oldest mountain ranges on the planet, and the central part of the Grenville orogeny dating back to around a billion years. The Grenville orogeny was a lengthy Mesoproterozoic mountain-building event associated with the evolution of the supercontinent Rodinia. Its legacy is a prominent orogenic belt which spans a significant portion of the North American continent, from Mexico to Labrador, and Scotland.

The distinct shift in the features of the landscape as the hills rise sharply on the other side of the Ottawa River, have always made this area strikingly beautiful. The further you go back in time, the higher and more striking those hills would have been. The Laurentian Mountains begin where the Ottawa River separates North from South at almost exactly the point at which this sacred site is located. The geology of the area also includes rocks deposited before the Cambrian Period 540 million years ago. The rarity of some of these rocks, as comparatively available in other regions, would also have made this place singularly attractive.

EASY TO REACH AND A MAGNET FOR ALL CREATURES

There's little doubt the falls would have been spectacular and a magnet for all the original inhabitants of this land. Aquatic debris from the falls would also have attracted birds and other scavengers, in turn attracting larger animals, which would certainly have made this an excellent hunting site as well. The nearness of the river would also have ensured an abundance of healthy, productive flora, and the area, much as it is now, would have contained an abundance of fruit, nuts and other edible plants.

The confluence of the three rivers (Ottawa, Gatineau, and Rideau) converging just below the falls is also an indicator that this area would have seen a great deal of traffic. Rivers were a popular means of travel by canoe and so people from vast distances could make the trek swiftly to this particular location.

INDIGENOUS OF THE TIME HAD NO SAY IN THE FUTURE OF THEIR SACRED SITE

Recognizing the potential from the power of the falls, early settlers flocked to the area, which has since grown to become the capital of Canada. Over time, it became extremely unsafe for Indigenous to venture to the site to perform their ceremonies. The [Potlatch Ban](#), legislation forbidding the practice of certain Native ceremonies, began in 1880 and lasted until 1951. The Chaudière Dam was built in 1908, right in the middle of this period. It's fair to say that the Indigenous of the time had no say in the future of their sacred site.

As we look back at activity occurring on the site since the lifting of the ban in the mid fifties, it's very clear that Indigenous began returning and holding regular ceremonies (including Pipe ceremonies, sweat lodges, fasting and more) there as soon as it was safe to do so, and continue to do so today, barring interference from authorities, who continue to try and discourage the use of this sacred ground. Unfortunately, there was and still is no public access to Chaudière Island, the very core of the sacred site, and the *only* one of the three islands with a view to the falls. As such, the people began gathering on the vacant land around the old Carbide Mill on Victoria Island, as close as they could get to the core of their site.

The geographic distinctiveness of the site actually incorporates a fairly large area. The region above, on either side, in between the falls, and all the way to the mouth of the other two rivers would have been quite special too. It is interesting that today, Confederation Boulevard, coined 'the Capital's ceremonial and discovery route', encircles this very same area, which embraces many of our national symbols of power and distinctiveness, including Canada's parliament buildings, the National Art Centre, the Canadian Museum of History, the National Archives, National Gallery of Canada, the Supreme Court of Canada, along with several museums, embassies and more. It is fascinating and seems somehow obvious that

such enormous representations of our strength and influence are held to the breast of such an ancient and powerful source.

Thanks to the authors, drawings and photographs taken in the period before the dam was built, it's clear that the Chaudière Falls was an incredible sight to behold. In countless ways, these falls have provided an abundance of power that has helped Canada to prosper greatly, lifted us out of the dark ages, provided energy, employment, kept us stocked with lumber, paper and electricity to heat and light our homes. These things also make this site very sacred. It is time to properly acknowledge and honour the bounty this sacred site has provided us with by retiring its industrial adaptations and restoring its pure function as an incredible feat of natural engineering. There is still so much more to be learned and gained from doing this.

WHAT DOES THE VISION LOOK LIKE?

So, let's fly now out of the past and into the future on the back of Grandfather Eagle to see what Asinabka looks like. Envision a beautiful island park in the heart of the city overlooking restored falls with clean running water beside a beautifully green-scaped island. Hear the powerful roar of the water, the sun glistening off the rainbow hued mist, birds in the trees, the wind rustling through the leaves of hundreds of healthy trees, an abundance of natural fauna, children playing, couples strolling, people tending beds of flowers, food and traditional medicines. See the colour, sights and sounds of an Indigenous marketplace and pow wow grounds right at the city core. See this beautiful symbolic gesture of environmental and Indigenous reconciliation and its potential to gently cleanse and restore the hearth and land for thousands of miles around and inspire similar action throughout the world. See the planetary healing taking place in its peace-building think tank and meeting places based on Indigenous values and concepts. See the global eco-benefits and tourism dollars that are pouring in not only for Indigenous but for the city as a whole. Feel the positive energy of this place and its outward effect on the rest of the world. Feel how good it is to know that you helped make happen one of the greatest Indigenous Healing Centres in all of Canada, and that the ones profiting from it are not private corporations but instead the Indigenous care takers of this land for the benefit of us all.

Grandfather William tried for years to get the government to pay attention to Indigenous views on environmental stewardship. He spoke of Asinabka not only as an ancient sacred site of priceless historical value, but it's existence as imperative to the health of the planet, and its restoration as a "symbolic gesture of reconciliation with Mother Earth". He tirelessly shared the story of the ancient Anishinaabe Seven Fires Prophecy belt which foretells a time when mankind would reach a 'fork in the road' and have to make important choices which would affect the future of the planet.

THE SACRED WAMPUM BELTS

Algonquin Elder William Commanda was the honoured carrier of three ancient sacred wampum belts:

THE SEVEN FIRES PROPHECY BELT is part of an ancient Anishinaabe prophecy marking epochs in the life of Indigenous on Turtle Island. Many Anishinaabe Elders alive today believe that we are in the time of the seventh fire, a time of great Earth changes.

According to the seventh part of the prophecy, "at this time the seventh and final Prophet came to the Anishinaabe. He was different from the others and had a strange light in his eyes. He came with a message, not only for the Anishinaabe people, but directly for all of humanity. "At the time of the Seventh Fire," he said, "a new people will emerge. They will retrace the footsteps of their ancestors and will try to find those things which have been lost along the way. They will approach the elders in search of guidance. It will not be an easy task but if they are of good heart and pure intentioned they can prevail. Some elders will be sleeping and have nothing to say, others will say nothing out of fear. The new generation must be fearless in their quest."

"The Light Skinned race will be at a crossroads. If they continue down the road of materialism, it will be their destruction and for all humanity as well. But if they choose to join with the Natural People of this land on the spiritual path then they will again have the chance to create a nation, the greatest spiritual nation ever to have existed. If they choose the right road, then the Seventh Fire will light the Eighth and final Fire, an eternal fire of peace, love brotherhood and sisterhood, and they will have the chance to create the greatest spiritual nation ever to have existed. But if they continue down the road of materialism, it will be their destruction and for all humanity as well."

THE 1700'S WELCOMING BELT depicts three figures, representing the English on one side, the French on the other, and the Indigenous in the middle. It is both significant and poignant to note that the sacred site at the heart of Grandfather William's vision is geographically located in between Ontario, which is predominantly English, and Quebec, which is predominantly French.

On December 31, 1857, Queen Victoria chose Ottawa to be the common capital for the Province of Canada (modern Quebec and Ontario). Ottawa was the only settlement of any significant size located right on the border of Canada East and Canada West (Upper and Lower Canada), making it a compromise between the French and English populations.

As Grandfather William described it in his book "Learning from a Kindergarten Dropout", the 1700's Welcoming belt "is about equitable SHARING" for all Canadians. In this way, this belt has become very symbolic of Grandfather's vision for Asinabka.

THE JAY TREATY BORDER CROSSING BELT underscores the fundamental spiritual message of Indigenous about BORDERLESSNESS. The Elder's people, the Mamuwini, the nomads, belong to North America, and as such they retain a sacred connection and responsibility to the land they are born to. As Elder Commanda put it, "My territory is as the river flows, as the bird flies and as the wind blows."

The "Jay Treaty" is an agreement signed by the United States and Great Britain in 1794 to allow Canadian born Native Americans to travel freely across the U.S./Canadian border.

Three ancient legendary wampum belts, each carrying potent and very applicable messages for right now, were in the hands of a holy man who called for the restoration of a special sacred site as a symbolic gesture of reconciliation with Mother Earth to heal the environment and humanity.

WHO SUPPORTS THIS CAMPAIGN?

There are many who believe that Canada is the great nation spoken of in the vision of the ancient Seven Fires Prophecy wampum belt, that this is the time spoken of in the prophecy and we are the ones we have been waiting for. One thing is clear, we must all wake up and take action.

Along with the thousands of Indigenous and non-Indigenous who attended William's gatherings every year, staunch supporters such as Douglas Cardinal, Lindsay Lambert, Richard Jackman, www.akikodjiwan.ca, elderswithoutborders.org, www.freethefalls.ca, www.itlSsacred.ca, www.stopwindmill.ca, equitableeducation.ca and many more continue to hold this vision and many, many continue to take up the call. These groups each have their own agendas, but the one thing all agree upon is that this is a sacred site and it should be restored in keeping with Grandfather William's vision.

Canada, as we approach our 150th, please ask yourself if the erosion William's vision is in alignment with Canada's commitment to its Indigenous, Truth and Reconciliation and the health of the environment. In this time of severe environmental crisis, are you willing to take the chance of allowing an extremely important piece of Indigenous prophecy and North American history to be swallowed up by the corporate machine?

Please take action as soon as possible. You may want to start by joining the march on Friday, June 23 from Victoria Island (10:00 a.m. at the Booth Street entrance) to Parliament Hill. For more information about this event, visit Facebook: [Faith is Peace: Walk for Our Sacred Site](#).

Stay tuned for:

Asinabka in Peril : Current Status of the Sacred Site – Part 2 of 2