

## Louisiana court ruling

# Tribe owns artifacts

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Louisiana's Court of Appeals has decided the Tunica-Biloxi Tribe is the rightful owner of artifacts that were buried with their ancestors.

From 1731 to 1764, ancestors of the Tunica-Biloxi Tribe had a village near the Mississippi River in what is now Louisiana. After 1764, the Tunicas left that village and eventually settled in their present location in central Louisiana.

Although the existence of the historical village was known, its exact location had been lost in the years since 1764. But in 1967, a treasure hunter, Leonard Charrier, found the site.

Because it was known the Tunicas buried artifacts with their dead, Charrier immediately began searching for burials. He found them, and over the next three years excavated and removed more than two tons of materials.

The artifacts included beads, stoneware, iron kettles, knives, muskets, Indian pottery, European ceramics, crucifixes, rings and

bracelets.

In 1974, litigation arose over ownership of the artifacts, and the tribe intervened to assert its claim.

Following a trial in 1983, a state district court ruled the Tunica-Biloxi owned the artifacts and did not have to compensate Charrier for discovery and excavation of the artifacts. On Oct. 15, 1986, the appellate court affirmed that decision.

According to the Native American Rights Fund, the Louisiana courts have thus established that Indian burial goods "rightfully belong to the descendants . . . for such disposition as the descendants may deem proper."

In addition, those courts have recognized that Indians do not view the excavation of their graves as scientifically or archaeologically justified but simply as "the systematic despoilation of their ancestral burial grounds," a fund spokesman said.

The tribe was represented by Donald Juneau, private counsel, and the fund's Richard Dauphinais.