Dedication Ceremony Honors First Indian Commissioner

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Speaking on Monday, December 18, 2000, at the opening of the Bureau of Indian Affairs' (BIA) new offices in Reston, Virginia, Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs Kevin Gover pondered on what Ely S. Parker, the first American Indian to be appointed Commissioner of Indian Affairs, would think of being honored 130 years after his tenure by the naming of a Department of the Interior building for him. Mr. Gover spoke to an audience of over 100 attendees that included officials and employees of the Interior Department, the Department's National Business Center (NBC), and the BIA; as well as representatives of Commissioner Parker's tribal nation and family; the property's owner, Damon Hardwood; and representatives of the building's architectural and construction firms.

Under a 10-year lease agreement, the BIA-NBC Ely S. Parker Building, which is located near the U.S. Geological Survey's (USGS) Reston facility, will be home to the BIA's Offices of Management and Administration and Information Resource Management, as well as the Interior Department's National Business Center. A commemorative bronze plaque with Commissioner Parker's image and history will be installed in the building's lobby.

"It is appropriate that we name this building after Ely Parker, a former warrior and Commissioner of Indian affairs," said Robert Lamb, Deputy Assistant Secretary-Budget and Finance, who represented Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt at the event. "We welcome his descendants to this special place." Mr. Lamb noted how rare it was for an Interior Department building to be named for an individual.

BIA Deputy Commissioner Sharon Blackwell, in calling the BIA's Management and Administration and Information Resource Management Offices "the heartbeat of the BIA," saw the move to Reston as strengthening the Bureau's commitment to servicing its customers and improving its management of trust accounts and assets.

In his keynote address, Assistant Secretary Gover touched on the life and times of Ely Parker, who headed the BIA from 1869 to 1871. In a speech that was part history lesson, Gover acknowledged the paradox Parker faced as a Native American who, in his role as BIA Commissioner, was responsible with carrying out federal policies aimed at assimilating Indian people, but who tried to ensure that the United States honored its treaty obligations and sought to eliminate widespread corruption within the BIA at a cost to his personal reputation and professional career.

Speaking in the Seneca tongue, Norman Hill ("Taa-Wonyas"), Wolf Clan Runner from the Tonawanda Seneca Nation, gave a thanksgiving blessing for the day's event. Ms. Evelyn Jonathan ("Einjhonesh"), Wolf Clan Mother from Tonawanda, who accompanied Mr. Hill as his interpreter, presented greetings from the Nation's leaders to the attendees. Also present was Bernadette Hill ("Go-Seni-Sas"), Heron Clan Mother from the Cayuga Nation and a direct descendent of Ely Parker.

Ely Samuel Parker (1828-1895), a citizen of the Tonawanda Seneca Nation, was born into the Wolf Clan

on the Tonawanda Reservation in New York State. Parker, who was made the sachem for his tribe and given the title Do-Ne-Ho-Geh-Weh, or “Keeper of the Western Door of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy),” was a remarkable person for his era. In a time when American Indians could not become U.S. citizens and were rarely seen in the professions, Parker was a diplomat, lawyer, and engineer. While the lack of American citizenship prevented him from practicing law, Parker’s engineering degree led him to a career supervising federal public works projects in Galena, Illinois, in the late 1850s, where he met and formed a personal friendship with the future general and president, Ulysses S. Grant. On April 9, 1865, Parker, as Grant’s military secretary, was present at Appomattox Court House in Virginia where he recorded the terms of surrender that ended the Civil War. In 1869, President Grant appointed Ely Parker Commissioner of Indian Affairs where he served until August 1871.

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