

Crack down on heritage thieves - Legislature has chance to put public's interest first

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Reasonable people can reasonably disagree, but fact and truth serve to limit the scope of that disagreement. Theft of antiquities is the third largest international crime behind illegal drugs and gun running. Nations expend untold political and economic capital recovering their lost treasures.

Recently, countries like Greece and Italy have successfully recovered works of art from no less prestigious institutions than the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Art Institute of Chicago and the Guggenheim Museum in Los Angeles.

Among states, Kentucky has the second largest number of sites identified for national and state historic preservation. Our preservation office and Heritage Council are recognized as national models. Their successful efforts to identify, catalogue, officially recognize and preserve hundreds of ancient and historically significant sites enrich all of our lives.

Attorney General Jack Conway has rightly filed charges against individuals from Ohio who planned and executed the theft of Indian Head Rock from the Commonwealth of Kentucky. Unfortunately, most media outlets have spoofed the tremendous efforts made to recover this state treasure but it is no laughing matter.

A year prior to the crime, one of the involved persons wrote an academic paper proposing to take the rock from Kentucky to create a downtown tourist attraction in Portsmouth, Ohio. With the mayor of that city and an Ohio state representative both apparently believing themselves to be above the law, men and equipment were prepared, the theft was completed and a city facility now houses the rock.

The Kentucky Native American Heritage Commission was outraged and the House of Representatives called for the return of our state's property. Commonwealth's Attorney Cliff Duvall agreed and successfully brought suit in state court against the thieves. Conway offered the accused an opportunity to settle the matter by admitting guilt and paying for the return of the rock. They did not bother to respond to him, showing further disdain and disrespect toward Kentuckians.

Trophy hunters, pothole diggers, collectors and traders in artifacts have long known of the abundance of Kentucky treasures, even if some of our citizens are just beginning to realize it. In the past, Kentucky has not fully prevented artifact thieves from operating in the state, resulting in many irreplaceable treasures being removed and graves desecrated for money.

Over the past four years, I have proposed historic preservation bills that would bring some protection to family cemeteries and historic sites. These bills have failed to pass, due in no small measure to groups of collectors who threaten local state legislators with retaliation. And the Kentucky Farm Bureau Insurance lobbies against them, claiming the bills could violate the private property rights of its policyholders.

Thus far, private interests have trumped the interests of all Kentuckians, and they have trumped good public policy. I hope this will be the year we pass House Bills 114 and 115. Kentuckians have much to preserve and we should take on those who wish to pillage our history for profit.

Indian Head Rock is as important to us today it was to hunters, traders and river-boaters traveling up and down the Ohio River as far back as the 1700's.

Nations around the world understand the importance of recovering and protecting their antiquities. It's a shame that some in the media and some neighbors to the north do not.

It is time Kentucky passed strong legislation, and takes all steps necessary to stop those who steal our state's historical artifacts and treasures.

Reginald Meeks represents a House district in Louisville.

Rep. Reginald Meeks represents a House district in Jefferson County.