

Kentucky's feathers ruffled over boulder

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Jan. 30--An 8-ton boulder that hadn't been visible above the Ohio River waterline for more than 80 years is now at the center of a border battle between Ohio and Kentucky.

After an Ohio historian pulled the sandstone rock from its watery confines in September and placed it in the Portsmouth municipal garage, some Kentucky officials threw a fit.

The Kentucky Legislature is even considering a resolution condemning the rock's removal and demanding that it be returned to Kentucky's side of the river.

What's so special about this boulder, known as Indian Head Rock? Some Kentucky officials say it contains carvings by prehistoric American Indians and the removal shows disrespect for their heritage.

Others dispute that contention, saying the rock contains a simple carving of a face and several names of early Portsmouth residents.

"The historical significance of this pretty much all relates to Ohio," said Ohio Rep. Todd Book, D-Portsmouth. Those who want to put it back or destroy it, he said, "must have rocks in their own head. This is a historically significant artifact that should be studied and enjoyed by people now and in the future."

Mostly, it appears that Kentuckians are ticked off that some Ohioans carted off a rock from their part of the river without permission.

"Basically, this was a raid," Kentucky Rep. Reginald Meeks, D-Louisville, told the Associated Press. "We're going to use all legal means to get them to return it to its rightful place in the commonwealth. And if that doesn't work, we may need to send a raiding party into Portsmouth."

For Steve Shaffer, the Ironton man who fed his interest in rock carvings by searching three years for the boulder and then organizing a team to bring it to the surface, the dispute has left him scratching his head. He said he has received threatening e-mails from Kentuckians, and he wonders why anyone would want to put the rock back.

"Probably a fraction of 1 percent of the population knew about this rock. It was forgotten," he said. "Amazingly, once we got it up, you wouldn't believe all the people that knew about it."

Shaffer hopes that state officials or Portsmouth Mayor James Kalb can work out a solution so the rock can be put on display in the city. He has written a research paper on it, including stories of how the carvings came to be, which range from theories on Indian markings to river pirates marking buried treasure.

"I have not heard one person in Kentucky say that this is important to their history," Shaffer said. "All we have heard is, 'Put it back in the water.' It's almost like they're going to punish Portsmouth for having this bit of history. They don't want it."