

Ohio, Kentucky Feuding Over a Rock in a Hard Place

11:00 AM-12:00 PM , The neighboring states of Ohio and Kentucky normally get along just fine, but now they have a problem, a dispute over an 8-ton rock of questionable historic value. Fred Kight of Member Station WOUB in Athens, Ohio explains.

FRED KIGHT: Steve Shaffer is a historian in Ohio who read about Indian Head Rock when he was a kid and became fascinated. The rock was partially submerged in the Ohio River near Portsmouth, Ohio, and was first noted in an archeological publication in 1847. It's sandstone, brownish in color and about the size of a small car. Shaffer never forgot about the boulder and several years ago began a quest to locate it. But that was easier said than done. Navigational dams have raised the Ohio River, and the rock hadn't been seen since 1920. After many diving excursions, Shaffer and some buddies found the relic and hauled it out of the river.

Mr. FRANK LEWIS (Reporter, Portsmouth Daily Times): I was given a tip. This is in September of '07. And I received a tip that it was down on the riverbank. And so I went down there, and it was covered with a large tarp.

KIGHT: That's Frank Lewis, a reporter for the Portsmouth Daily Times, who's been on this story since the rock was removed from the river.

Mr. LEWIS: And so that is kind of how it all started. And then we started following the history of it, not realizing how far this was going to go.

KIGHT: Steve Shaffer donated the rock to the City of Portsmouth, Ohio. But the Ohio River is actually in Kentucky, so Portsmouth officials offered it to the town of South Shore, Kentucky. They said they weren't interested in the rock. So Portsmouth officials began making plans to put it on display in Ohio. That irked Kentucky state officials. Kentucky Attorney General Jack Conway wrote a letter demanding the return of the boulder.

Attorney General JACK CONWAY (Kentucky): This was a registered antiquity within the commonwealth of Kentucky, registered by the commonwealth of Kentucky, and it was taken. And that constitutes theft of an antiquity under our statutes.

KIGHT: But Ohio officials argue that Indian Head Rock now belonged to them. Then the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers weighed in, arguing that it had jurisdiction of the river. Meanwhile, the rock has been moved to a most inauspicious place - a city service department garage. Indian Head Rock isn't really much to look at until you get up close and can see that it has lots of names etched on it.

Mr. RANDY NICHOLS: In essence, it's a graffiti rock.

KIGHT: Randy Nichols is a local history buff. Some of the names are haphazardly scratched and difficult to make out. Others are neatly chiseled and easy to read. There's also a head etched on the side, though it looks nothing like a Native American.

Mr. NICHOLS: There's a face here that some have said it looks like Charlie Brown, and in the early days it was known as the Portsmouth Indians Head Rock. It's pretty much a life-size depiction of a face, a smiley face if you will.

KIGHT: Historian Steve Shaffer is not smiling though, nor is he talking to the media on the advice of his lawyer. That's because removing the boulder from the Ohio River bottom put him in legal jeopardy. Shaffer and one of his helpers were indicted on felony charges in Kentucky this past summer and are awaiting trial. Meanwhile, Indian Head Rock remains not on display in a park, but in the corner of a service department garage in Portsmouth, Ohio. For NPR News, I'm Fred Kight in Athens, Ohio.

WERTHEIMER: To see photos of the Indian Head Rock, visit our Web site, npr.org.

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