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Shaffer pleads not guilty to theft

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Jul. 25--GREENUP -- The Ohio man accused of illegally removing a historic rock from the Ohio River pleaded not guilty to a felony charge on Thursday.

Steven R. Shaffer, 51, of Ironton, who was indicted last month by a grand jury, was arraigned in Greenup Circuit Court on an charge of removing an object of antiquity.

Judge Bob Conley set a trial date of Oct. 16 for Shaffer. He also allowed Shaffer to remain free on a \$5,000 signature bond.

Shaffer, who headed the expedition to remove the 8-ton boulder known as Indian Head Rock from its resting point near South Shore on Sept. 9, didn't speak at Thursday's hearing, other than to answer "Yes, sir" when Conley asked him if he indeed wished to plead not guilty to the charge.

The charge against Shaffer is a Class D felony that could land him in prison for one to five years if he is convicted.

Shaffer's attorney, Michael Curtis, revealed that the office of Greenup Commonwealth's Attorney Clifford Duvall had offered his client a plea agreement that would have Shaffer accepting a three-year sentence and also require him to testify against others involved in removing the rock. He said his client had no intention of accepting the deal.

In a related development Thursday, the grand jury probing the rock's removal indicted a second defendant.

The panel charged David G. Vetter, 54, of the 2900 block of Cedar Street in Portsmouth, with the same offense as Shaffer.

According to Duvall, Vetter was a member of the dive team that floated the rock to the surface of the river. After it was raised, the rock was towed to shore at Portsmouth, removed from the water with a crane and taken to the city's garage, where it remains.

Duvall said the grand jury, which is at the end of its term, also issued a recommendation that future grand juries continue to hear evidence in the case. He said some members of the panel had expressed an interest in having the same group of jurors continue to investigate the matter, but it wasn't clear whether Conley would go along with that idea.

A grand jury indictment is a formal accusation of a crime and does not establish guilt.

Indian Head Rock, which was registered with the University of Kentucky as a protected archeological object in 1986, was once a navigation marker and an attraction for local residents, who would walk out into the river and carve their initials on it when the water was low. However, the boulder had remained mostly submerged since the construction of the lock system on the Ohio.

The rock got its name because of a carving on it that resembles a crude face, which some have said may be a petroglyph carved by an unknown Native American. However, Dr. Fred E. Coy, the author of a book on rock art in Kentucky, recently examined the boulder and concluded the carving was more likely done in the 1800s with metal tools.

The removal of the rock has generated national headlines and triggered a dispute between elected officials in Ohio and Kentucky. The Kentucky General Assembly passed a resolution calling for the boulder's return to the commonwealth, while Ohio politicians have vowed to resist any such efforts.