

'Indian Head' boulder sparks Kentucky-Ohio rift

- By JOE BIESK
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When an Ohio historian helped pull a massive sandstone boulder from the bottom of the Ohio River this summer, he didn't think it would set off a charged dispute between Kentucky and Ohio.

It did. One Kentucky legislator is demanding the 8-ton rock's return, and another believes the matter will ultimately be decided in the courts.

Rep. Reginald Meeks, D-Louisville, who is a member of Kentucky's Native American Heritage Commission, is sponsoring a resolution in the Kentucky General Assembly that condemns the rock's removal and calls for its return to Kentucky.

"Basically, this was a raid," Meeks said of the efforts to extract the rock and take it to Portsmouth, Ohio, about 110 miles southeast of Cincinnati. "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."

Steve Shaffer, who has a bachelor's degree in historical interpretation from Ohio University, scoffs at characterizing the operation as a raid. Shaffer says the rock had been submerged since at least 1920.

"After 87 years, we find this rock and we're able to get it out of the water and protect it, and now it's a big issue," Shaffer said. "We just want to protect it and display it."

The rock, Shaffer says, is valuable to Portsmouth's local history, not Kentucky's.

Much about the rock's origin is unknown. It has a crude carving of a face and another of a house, along with multiple names from some of the early residents of Portsmouth etched into it.

No doubt historic, the rock's true history is debatable.

Its existence was certainly known locally during the late 1800s and early 1900s, and some say it was a geographical marking along the Ohio River for boat travelers.

Locals would picnic near the rock, Shaffer said. Who carved the petroglyphs, and when, is unknown, Shaffer said.

Meeks believes the face carving was prehistoric and left by American Indians. Others, like Shaffer, aren't so sure.

Now that the rock is out of the river, everyone from local prosecutors to the Kentucky State Police has looked into the dispute over ownership. Cliff Duvall, commonwealth's attorney for Greenup and Lewis counties, said he's investigated the case, but has not received a police report. The Kentucky State Police still have an open investigation.

The Ohio River lies mostly within Kentucky's jurisdiction.

"It's a piece of Kentucky culture, and it was stolen by these individuals from Portsmouth, Ohio," Meeks said. "We want it back, plain and simple."

Shaffer and a group of divers — some of whom are Kentuckians — spent tremendous effort retrieving the boulder from the river floor. They brought it to Portsmouth Mayor James Kalb, who says officials would like to put it on display.

Kalb said he and other city officials have not had much communication with people from Kentucky seeking the rock's return.

Still, Kalb said the backlash he and his city have received has been surprising.

"It started out way out of proportion and has continued to grow like that," Kalb said.

Meanwhile, the rock sits in a climate-controlled city garage.

David Pollack, director of the Kentucky Archeological Survey, said that even though Shaffer and the divers thought they were doing a good thing, they also may have broken various state laws and federal regulations in the process. Pollack said the rock was protected by Kentucky's antiquities act, and that the divers first should have sought a permit from the Army Corps of Engineers.

"It needs to be brought back to the state of Kentucky. It's owned by the state and, I guess at this point, my own feeling would be to put it back," Pollack said. "In some ways it's protected by it being in the water. We don't know what's going to happen to the rock now that it's out of the water."

Kalb acknowledged that city officials are trying to obtain a permit from the corps retroactively to move the rock.

State Rep. Tanya Pullin, who represents a Kentucky district across the river from Portsmouth, said she believes the decision on who owns the rock will ultimately rest with the courts.

"It is an antiquity, and so I'm very concerned about it," said Pullin, D-South Shore. "Not just for us right now, but for our children and grandchildren that we do the proper thing."