Grand jury indicts leader of rock expedition

By KENNETH HART
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GREENUP The man who headed the expedition to remove an 8-ton chunk of sandstone known as Indian Head Rock from the depths of the Ohio River last year has been indicted on a felony charge.

A Greenup County grand jury on Thursday handed up an indictment charging Steven R. Shaffer, 51, of Ironton, with removing a protected archaeological object without a permit, in violation of state law. The charge is a Class D felony that carries a prison sentence of one to five years.

The indictment alleges that on Sept. 9, Shaffer, in complicity with others, violated the Kentucky Antiquities Act “by exploring, excavating, appropriating and/or removing from land owned by the Commonwealth of Kentucky ... an object of antiquity” without first obtaining the necessary permit from the University of Kentucky’s Department of Anthropology and the recommendation of the agency owning or having control of the land upon which the object was situated.

Reached by telephone Friday, Shaffer said he was astonished to learn he had been indicted.

Shaffer said an expert who examined the rock re-

See ROCK / Page A12
recently published a study stating the belief the carvings on the boulder were probably not done by Native Americans, and were more likely made with metal tools sometime in the 1500s. Shaffer said that he thought that would put the issue of the rock's historical value to rest.

'I really thought that would be it,' he said. 'I was kind of startled that they wanted to continue to prosecute this thing.'

Shaffer, who has contested the efforts saved the rock from being damaged or lost forever, also said he believed revenge was the primary motive for the indictment. 'I've tried, but I really can't come up with any other reason for it,' he said.

Greene County's Commonwealth's Attorney Clifford Duval, who began presenting evidence in the case to the grand jury in late March, said he wasn't particularly surprised Shaffer would feel that way. But he said the notion the indictment was the result of a vendetta on his or anyone else's part was preposterous.

'Under no personal animosity toward Mr. Shaffer. I don't even know him,' he said. 'I'm just doing what I'm supposed to do, which is uphold the law.'

Duval said other indictments could be forthcoming against Shaffer's alleged co-conspirators, namely the others who were involved in the effort to float the boulder to the surface of the Ohio and tow it to shore at Portsmouth, where it was removed from the water with a crane and placed in the city's garage.

How the case progresses could well depend on the outcome of a hearing scheduled for next week in Scioto County Common Pleas Court, Duval said. At that proceeding, a judge will decide whether several witnesses who have been deemed material to the case by a Kentucky judge can be compelled to testify before the grand jury.

The hearing is set for Tuesday, Duval said. Shaffer said he intended to fight the criminal charge and had not yet spoken to an attorney.

A date for Shaffer's arraignment hasn't been set.

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

Indian Head Rock, which was registered as a protected archeological object in 1999, 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 under water since the 1920s.

The removal of the rock from the river triggered a dispute between elected officials in Ohio and Kentucky. Lawmakers in Kentucky have called for its return, while those in Ohio have argued that the rock is more germane to Portsmouth's history than it is to Kentucky's and rightfully belongs in the Buckeye State.