

89.3 WFPL News

Indian Head Rock: A Story in Five Scenes

by JHOBAN on JUNE 11, 2008

Scene 1. October, 1891. Indian Head rock is submerged in the Ohio River.

A reporter from the Portsmouth Times in Ohio is watching two men row a skiff across the river toward Kentucky. They're searching for signs of a sunken rock, a rock with historic carvings. Mostly the carvings are a kind of vintage graffiti. Initials and names and dates—likely the work of early European arrivals to the area when the river was low enough. But locals like the Portsmouth Times reporter know that one carving on the rock looks like a primitive face—basically a ring with two holes for eyes and two half-circles for ears.

“What is the story of the Indian Head? Like all stories that run back into tradition, it has been painted in various colors during the years. The boy idea of it has always been that it was the work of Indians.... But there is nothing in the features to indicate that they might not just as well have been those of a white man...” (excerpted from the Portsmouth Times, October 17, 1891)

And so the legend grew. But the river continued to rise after it was dammed, and the rock lay somewhat forgotten at the bottom of the murky, busy river.

Scene two. More than a hundred years later. Amateur historian Steven Shaffer decides to go looking for the rock. □

Shaffer, who's an upholsterer by trade, read about the rock as a boy. Years later rock carvings still fascinate him. And he wants to make a documentary.

“This Indians Head, that one was the one that really fascinated me. And I thought at that time that it would be a great thing to discover that and put that as part of the documentary.”

The documentary was never made. But after a three-year search, Shaffer and fellow divers find the rock. And leave it. And that's that. Until Shaffer meets some search and rescue divers from Portsmouth.

“I asked them, I said ‘Hey, would you like to go over and see the Indians Head?’ And they'd never heard of it, and they dove, and they said, ‘Wow, did you see those names? Those are Portsmouth names. Did you ever think about getting this up?’”

Shaffer and the divers manage to raise the 8 ton rock with inflatable

bags, and hoist it onto a boat with a crane.

Scene three. The trouble begins.

They bring it to a city warehouse where the mayor celebrates its arrival.

“It’s a criminal action. In criminal court.”

Across the river, Kentucky county attorney Cliff Duvall says Indian Head rock is protected under Kentucky’s antiquities law. That it was in Kentucky waters, not Ohio’s.

“And there are class D felony penalties for damaging or removing objects of antiquity without the knowledge and approval of the proper authorities in Kentucky.”

So, recently, Duvall sues two Portsmouth residents—likely Steve Shaffer and the mayor of Portsmouth—though Duvall wouldn’t say. He’d like to see them in a Kentucky court and ask for restitution of the rock. But it’s not as simple as that. An Ohio judge has to order them to cross state lines. And a hearing has been set for June 24th. Duvall insists this isn’t about a border war.

“The issue is not about who owns the rock, it’s not who’s going to be able to gawk at it in some museum, or whether the Ohioans get it and beat the Kentuckians, or vice versa. It’s about all antiquities.”

Scene four. The politicians get involved.

The Kentucky Native American Heritage Commission sponsors a resolution in the state House of Representatives, condemning what it calls the “illegal removal” of the rock.

The accusations begin to fly. Newspaper articles are churned out. Commissioner and Representative from Louisville Reginald Meeks says the media—present company excluded—misattributes a quote to him. A rabble-rousing quote from the House floor during debate the rock. He clarifies.

“It was an off the cuff, spontaneous comment by the speaker of the house, who indicated that he was ready to go raid, if I was ready to lead. And I indicated that I was ready to lead if he was ready to follow. But Meeks calls the idea of an actual raiding party to reclaim the rock nonsensical.

On the other side of the Ohio, State Representative from Portsmouth, Todd Book, files his own resolution, calling on Kentucky to relinquish any claim to the rock, calling it “inextricably linked to the city of Portsmouth Ohio.”

He organizes an essay contest for fourth graders, who must write about why the rock belongs in Portsmouth. The essay contest goes

national. It's called "Rock this Essay." There's even a video.

Lyrics to video:

"You left your name so someday it would be seen.

Couldn't know gonna be a big stink one day

You got mud on your face

A big disgrace..."

Scene five. Not quite the end.

Steve Shaffer thinks the rock should stay put.

"I think the rock should stay in Portsmouth. They're willing to keep it in a climate controlled facility and take very good care of it."

Representative Meeks says the damage is already done.

"It should never have been removed because the river was providing all the protection it needed in order to preserve it for future generations."

True, future generations would probably need to be certified divers and feel very at home in low visibility waters. And of course, stones in water tend to erode, eventually. But where the rock can be seen and studied next is for the court to decide.

The End.

(Reporter's note: Thanks to Scott Dowd and Brian Conn for the use of their excellent voices.)

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