

Between States, Hard Feelings Over a Rock's Place

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PORTSMOUTH, Ohio

An eight-ton rock rested for generations at the bottom of the Ohio River, minding its own business as time and currents passed. It favored neither Ohio to the north nor Kentucky to the south. It just — was.

Occasionally, when water levels dropped, the boulder would break the surface long enough to receive the chiseled tattoos of mildly daring people seeking remembrance. But it stopped playing peek-a-boo nearly a century ago, leaving only ephemera in its wake, including a sepia photograph of a well-dressed woman in a frilly hat, standing in the middle of the Ohio, on this rock.

Now, because of one man's obsessive good intention, the fabled rock sits on old tires in the municipal garage of this river city, awaiting the outcome of a border dispute that goes something like this:

Some Ohioans say the rock is an important piece of Portsmouth history and should be put on display. Some Kentuckians say the rock is an important piece of Kentucky, period, and should be returned. And some in both states say: I've been distracted by war, recession and a presidential campaign, so forgive me. But are we fighting over a rock?

Last month the Kentucky House of Representatives passed a resolution demanding the rock's return to its watery bed, with one of its members suggesting that a raiding party to Portsmouth might be in order. Not to be outdone, the Ohio House of Representatives is considering a resolution that asserts the rock's significance to Ohio, and its speaker has said he is ready to guard the boulder with his muzzle-loading shotgun.

All this has stunned Steve Shaffer, 51, the earnest local historian who rediscovered the rock, raised the rock and anticipated a more enthusiastic celebration of the rock. But at least the rock is happy, he said. "It loves to be the center of controversy."

The boulder sat almost certainly on the Kentucky side of the river, where the shoreline remains mostly undeveloped. This is why the rock became lodged deeper in the collective consciousness of the city on the other shore: Portsmouth, now another hurting Rust Belt city, but once a center of commerce, forging steel, making shoes.

In Portsmouth and beyond, the boulder became known as Indian Head Rock, because its bottom half bore a crude etching of a round head, with two dots for eyes, another dot for a nose, and a dash for a mouth; a kind of early Charlie Brown.

The face spawned many theories of origin. An American Indian petroglyph. A river bandit's carving to mark where loot was stored. A boatman's crude measure to gauge fluctuating water levels. Or, as a 1908 newspaper article has it, the 1830s handiwork of a Portsmouth boy named John Book, who then grew up to fall at the Battle of Shiloh.

Whenever the rock emerged from the water, people would boat or swim out to read the names and initials engraved on its sandstone hide, and maybe add their own to this honor roll of stone. H.W.H. Oct.

50, and E.D.C. Sep 1856, and Luther, and F. Kinney, and D. Ford. Several of these surnames remain familiar in Portsmouth today.

But dam work in the early 20th century raised the water level several feet, and the celebrated boulder — often featured in newspapers and on postcards — vanished from view. And Portsmouth soon forgot its pet rock.

In the late 1960s, though, an Ohio Valley schoolboy read of the Indian Head Rock in a musty book of local history, and he never forgot it. That was Steve Shaffer. He grew up, studied historical interpretation at Ohio University, developed an interest in prehistoric rock carvings, and quietly resolved to find the rock.

He and some divers began the hunt in 2000, using clues in old newspaper accounts about the rock's location. He remained in the boat, though; he had lost 70 percent of his hearing to Meniere's disease, and diving could cause further damage. But when the expeditions of 2000 and 2001 found only abandoned cars and dumped refrigerators, Mr. Shaffer earned his diver's certification and joined the search — at great risk to his hearing.

The risk paid off. In September 2002, a diving buddy rose to the surface to exclaim: That's it! It's got initials all over it! Mr. Shaffer immediately went down to see for himself. There, amid the river's murk: the Indian Head Rock.

Nearly every summer after that, Mr. Shaffer dove down to pay his respects to the rock. "Just to check on it," he said.

Then, late last summer, and almost on a whim, he and some diving friends resurrected the boulder with a harness and some barrels and air bags. They soon reported to Portsmouth's mayor, James Kalb, that they had something to show him — and it's bigger than a breadbox. The stunned and grateful mayor thanked them, saying a piece of Portsmouth's past had been salvaged.

Not everyone saw it that way. Some said that once exposed to air the rock would disintegrate; it didn't. Some said that Mr. Shaffer needed a permit from the Army Corps of Engineers to remove anything from the river; he agreed, and has applied for one after the fact.

Some said the rock should not have been disturbed because that Charlie Brown-like face was an American Indian petroglyph. In November a delegation from Kentucky — with Dr. Fred E. Coy Jr., a prehistoric carvings expert, in tow — visited the Portsmouth municipal garage and waited anxiously while the doctor conducted his examination. His expert opinion: "I can't tell."

No matter. Jagged verbal stones continue to be tossed from either side of the river.

Reginald Meeks, the Kentucky state representative who sponsored the resolution of condemnation, said Friday that law-enforcement officials were investigating what he described as the theft of a state antiquity. He said the rock should be returned to Kentucky, where state officials could examine it and decide its future.

"I tell you, they just played cowboy," Mr. Meeks said, voice rising. "And came to Kentucky and stole this item."

But Todd Book, an Ohio legislator from Portsmouth who last week introduced the resolution praising the rock's resurrection, said Ohioans believed they were in the right.

Mr. Book — who likes to think he is related to the John Book who may have carved that face on the boulder — said the story of the rock had already become an educational tool in Ohio. Fourth graders in the region are being asked to write essays on what the state should do with the rock, he said, while high school seniors are being asked to write position papers on the following: “Why the rock should be Ohio’s and not Kentucky’s.”

Who knows how this heavy matter will be resolved. For now, though, an eight-ton chunk of sandstone, riddled with the markings of the long-dead, sits in a municipal garage near some city trucks and a lawn mower. And every so often a well-intentioned man wearing a hearing aid stops by to check on it.