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Grand jury indicts leader of rock expedition

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Jun. 20--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 archeological 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 Thursday, Shaffer said he was astonished to learn he had been indicted.

Shaffer said an expert who examined the rock recently published a study stating his belief the carvings on the boulder were probably not done by Native Americans, and were more likely made with metal tools sometime in the 1800s. Shaffer said 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 contended his 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.

Greenup Commonwealth's Attorney Clifford Duvall, 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.

"I have 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."

Duvall 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, Duvall 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, Duvall 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 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 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.